

## Chapter 4

# Transformations of Early Childhood in Japan: From Free Play to Extended Education

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### Abstract

In recent decades, childhood in Japan has undergone significant transformations. Government policies geared at boosting women's labor force participation, a declining fertility rate, rising costs of having children on the one hand, and increased spending on public childcare and support measures for families, on the other hand, contribute to these ongoing changes. Having only one child is becoming the norm while mothers' role in society is shifting. The traditional family structure is moving from the previously predominant male breadwinner model to more dual-earner families. Children now spend significant amounts of time in care and education institutions.

In this chapter, we analyze current configurations of early childhood in institutions and the family from a policy perspective and regarding children's predominant education and care arrangements. Drawing on various survey data sets and evidence from demographic statistics to pedagogical ethnographies, we look at how childcare policies and families reshape the organization of children's lives and outline how institutions and educators create learning experiences aligned with the values of a collectivist society. However, despite being deeply rooted in traditional child-rearing goals, many parents also subscribe to rigorous educational arrangements from early childhood onwards to prepare children for success in a competitive education system. The chapter finishes with an outlook on future directions of how policymakers and the ongoing institutionalization of childhood continue to change children's lives.

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## Introduction

In recent decades, childhood in Japan has undergone significant transformations. Government policies geared at a higher labor force participation of married women, a declining fertility rate, rising costs of children on the one hand, and increased spending on public childcare and support measures for families, on the other hand, have contributed to these changes (Ogawa et al., 2009). Having only one child is becoming more common. As women's and, therefore, mothers' role in society is shifting, the traditional family structure has moved from the previously predominant male breadwinner model to more dual-earner families. Mothers' participation in the labor market is also a consequence of the growing job insecurity of their husbands. Inequalities in Japanese society are growing, and parents are often concerned about their children's competitiveness in the education system. The use of cram schools (*juku*) is widespread, and children attend extra lessons outside their regular school hours from early primary school onwards.

Parents are now in growing need of institutions providing long hours of education and care to children soon after birth, which kickstarted a reorganization of early childhood and an expansion of early daycare (Newport, 2000). Although attending a daycare facility is neither compulsory nor free in Japan, early childhood is highly institutionalized, with nearly all children from three years old attending one of the three main types of preschool institutions: kindergarten (*youchien*), day nursery (*hoikusho*), or an ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) center (*nintei kodomo-en*). Therefore, early childhood institutions are crucial in defining intergenerational relations beyond the family.

Despite the continuing modernization of Japanese society and its institutions, traditional educational goals like playfulness, empathy and sociability are still highly endorsed by Japanese parents and appear to dominate child-rearing practices in early childhood institutions and families (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010; Izumi-Taylor & Rogers, 2001).<sup>1</sup> However, as children transition into primary school, parents begin to adjust children's lives to the expectations of the standardized test system that structures Japanese schools.

Using data from several national surveys and drawing on a wide range of studies from sociology, anthropology and educational research, we first outline the ongoing transformations of parenthood, family structure and childcare policies in Japan and investigate their effects on the organization of children's lives. Second, we discuss the

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<sup>1</sup>In his history of middle-class childhood in early twentieth-century Japan, Jones (2010) argued that the ideology of the "childlike child" was introduced and upheld by established urban elites to counter the emerging new middle-class construction of the child as the "superior student," which became dominant in the postwar era. However, Japanese parents today still embrace the children's right to play freely and show more positive attitudes toward children having unstructured time than parents, for example, in the United Kingdom and France (Gleave, 2009).

predominant normative approaches to education, the cultural logics of child-rearing and how they shape adult–child interactions in childcare institutions and the family. We provide examples of how educators create socialization experiences geared toward becoming members of a collectivist society. Toward the end of the chapter, we move on to middle childhood and discuss how intensive parenting practices and educational activities outside preschool institutions and schools increasingly shape children’s lives. We look at different forms of extended education, such as cram school, arts and athletic activities. Although social class differences in Japan might not be as vivid and profound as in Western countries such as the United States (Lareau, 2011), the anxiety among parents that their children might be left behind is amplified. Therefore, more and more parents arrange for intense learning opportunities for their children to prepare them for successfully applying to private and elite secondary schooling. The competition has led to increased participation in cram school during primary school. This recent development contrasts with the cultural norms and pedagogical philosophy prevalent in early childhood to give children time to play and gradually adapt to societal norms. Thus, the organization of early childhood in Japan reflects a collectivist but simultaneously success-oriented society.<sup>2</sup>

## Changing Family Patterns and the Normalization of the “Only Child”

Two trends can be identified that are reshaping family patterns and, as a result, children’s lives in Japan. The *first* well-known fact about Japan is its severely low fertility rate, which among the great industrial nations is only rivaled by Italy (Trifiletti, 2006). The decline in childbirths has a significant impact on childhood not only because for children it means that there are fewer other children, but given the lowering number of children within families, children also grow up more often as a couple’s only child; both developments reflect in children’s early childcare arrangements.

The *second* trend is that it has become more common for mothers to reenter the workforce shortly after childbirth. Traditionally, Japanese women would stay home and willingly carry the largest share of care work, which has long been widely believed to be the ideal of motherhood (Watanabe, 1999). Devotion to one’s children and self-sacrifice were long praised as the pathway to a woman’s happiness and rewards, with the hardships of child-rearing being the source of maternal pleasure (Sasagawa, 2006, p. 131). Today, the increasing cost of living and economic needs, alongside the global trend for women to build their own careers and seek employment for personal fulfillment and financial benefits due to the popularization of higher education among

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<sup>2</sup>The combination of success orientation and collectivism is, of course, not unique to Japan. In a recent edited volume by Chen and Lau (2022), authors from different Asian countries report how childhood relates to notions of success and collectivist values as represented in various outlets such as children’s books and movies. Regarding the organization of daily life, Gu (2021) discusses the impact of values and beliefs on parenting practices geared toward educational success in China.

women, are changing women's approaches to family life. This trend is reflected in the dramatic growth of maternal employment over the past decades. This section will present statistics underscoring these two trends that have uprooted the dominant configurations of childhood in Japan.

- (1) Expanding on the first issue, the low fertility rate, we can see that, like in Western nations, the lowering fertility rate has been considered a serious political issue in Japan.<sup>3</sup> The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has gradually declined since the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> In 2021, the TFR was 1.30 children per woman and, therefore, well below 1.5, which has been hypothesized as the threshold of the “low-fertility trap” (Lutz et al., 2006). As Lutz et al. (2006) argue, low fertility, in the long run, generates a generation that is used to seeing a significant fraction of the adult population not having children or only one child, which over time shapes people's mindset and makes it more acceptable to prefer having no or only a few children. These trends were long thought to be primarily caused by a decreasing marriage rate in younger generations. As a result, the nonmarital childbirth rate in Japan has been meager. In 2019, the nonmarital rate of total childbirths was only 2.38%. This shows that the decreasing rate of childbirth in Japan is closely connected to the decline in marriage. In 2020, 25.7% of men and 16.4% of women were unmarried at age 50.

Although for years, the number of children per couple did not seem to be low, thus not delivering an explanation for the low birth rate, the situation is now slowly changing. According to the 16th National Fertility Survey by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (IPSS), the number of children per couple in 2021 stood at 1.90 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022). This figure used to be around 2.2 between 1977 and 2002. Since 2002 the number is gradually going down. Regarding the final number of children per couple, the mode value in 2021 is still two children (50.8%), but the second most frequent value is one child (19.7%). Although, in 1997, 23.8% of couples still had three children. That percentage

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<sup>3</sup>The Japanese government has responded to the low fertility rate by funding surveys and studies to find out the root causes of the lowering birth rate and by implementing a series of pro-family policies all geared at raising the birth rate, though without successfully turning the tide (Raymo et al., 2015). Rosenbluth (2007) argues that family-friendly policies and improving childcare services will not convince women of having more children as long as the labor market stays inhospitable to women. Currently, the labor market requires women to focus their efforts and time on building their careers if they want to secure the jobs they desire. Permanent full-time work contracts guarantee indefinite employment with gradually increasing wages but typically long, inflexible work hours that are hardly compatible with motherhood and family life (Nagase, 2018). In January 2023, Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced “unprecedented countermeasures” to simultaneously increase women's occupational opportunities and double the childcare budget (The Japan Times, 2023).

<sup>4</sup>Consider that in the 1940s Japanese women on average bore 4.5 children, which fueled the booming postwar economy and helped build the solid social welfare state that is now in danger.

dropped to 18.6 in 2021. The number of couples without children has been gradually increasing (7.7% in 2021), although it is still low compared to many Western nations. We can see from these changes that having “only one child” is gradually normalizing in Japan. This trend is most robust in couples who got married at around 35 years and older. Fig. 1 shows the mean of the ideal number of children, the intended number of children and the actual number of children by women’s age at their first marriage in 2015 (The 15th National Fertility Survey by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research). All three indicators decrease as the age of marriage increases. For those who got married when they were older than 35 years, the intended number is 1.16, and their mean of the actual number of children is only 0.7.

- (2) Japan’s second significant change in young married couples is the increasing employment rate of women after childbirth, which bears wide-ranging consequences. Between 2015 and 2019, 42.6% of mothers went back to work after their first childbirth, and 74.7% of regularly employed mothers were continuously working after childbirth. In the late 1980s, only 5.5% of

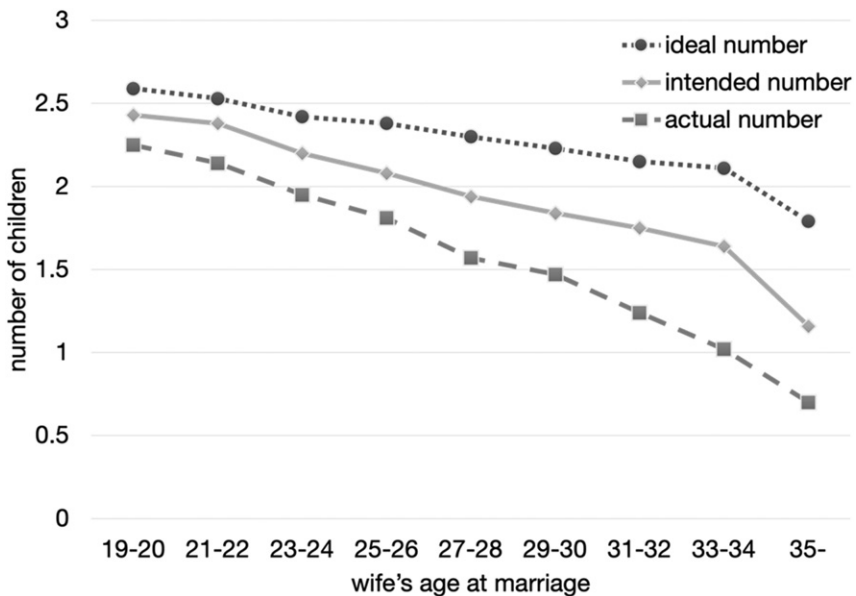


Fig. 1. The Ideal Number of Children, the Intended Number and the Actual Number of Children by Wife’s Age at Marriage. *Source:* The 15th 2015 Japanese National Fertility Survey (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022a).

mothers returned to work after having their first child (National Institute of Population and Social Security, 2022). Today, women are aware of the highly gendered division of care work. Hence, they are less likely to give up employment to have more than one child. Facing the decision between having a career and having children, more than a few women compromise between having a career and starting a family by having only one child and returning to work soon after (Brinton & Oh, 2019). However, the “male breadwinner” and “woman as homemaker” family model has by no means become obsolete (Tachibanaki, 2010; Tokuhiko, 2009). In 2016, 38% of households still had a full-time homemaker (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2016), while men’s time spent on unpaid care work was less than an hour per day (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2019). So, many women still quit their jobs to commit their entire time to child-rearing and other care work.

Nevertheless, the ongoing changes to family patterns mean that many infants and children have dual-earning parents. In this situation, the question of who takes care of their children has become a social issue in multiple ways. First, parents need to select a childcare institution to care for their children during parental working hours; second, as care institutions usually do not cover the whole day, parents might have to combine professional childcare with private care providers such as babysitters and other family members; third, as parents increasingly organize their children’s daily lives outside the core family, some might decide to enroll their children in additional educational programs and so-called “enrichment activities.” As in Western societies where social class differences and the pressure on parents to train their children to “get ahead” (Smyth, 2016) from early childhood through the preschool years are increasing (Stefansen & Farstad, 2010; Vincent et al., 2008), parents in Japan – and especially mothers – are part of the globally expanding discourse around intensive parenting during early childhood as a critical period in cognitive development (Smyth & Craig, 2017). While the use of “enrichment activities” and classed patterns of child-rearing in early childhood has not yet been fully explored for Japan, there is evidence from different East Asian nations showing that parents have added conscious choices of care and education institutions and “enrichment activities” to their educational work (Göransson et al., 2022). For example, using Japanese panel data of children from primary school third grade to junior high school third grade (during six years in a three-wave survey), Nakanishi (2017) showed that mothers holding university or college degrees tended to use storytelling and extracurricular education for their children more often than those having high school degrees. Also, extracurricular education positively affected achievement scores, and children of highly educated mothers tended to get higher scores.

The following sections will discuss children’s education and care arrangements in more detail. However, it is crucial to understand that mothers still do the largest share of household and care work, even if both parents are regularly

employed, and children increasingly attend nonfamily care and education services.

## Care and Education Institutions

Although attending a daycare facility is not compulsory, early childhood in Japan is highly institutionalized with two central childcare institutions: kindergarten (*Yochien*) and day nursery (*Hoikujo*), which cater to different parental needs and partially different age groups of children. The day nursery is a *welfare institution* for children 0–6 years old. Contrary to kindergarten, children can stay there from morning to evening (in exceptional cases overnight). The day nursery is mainly used by working mother families. In 2020, there were 23,759 nurseries with 2,040,000 children enrolled. As more and more women continue to have jobs postnatal, the need for nurseries is rapidly growing, making the shortage of daycare centers a severe social issue in metropolitan areas. At the same time, the number of children enrolling in kindergartens is decreasing.

Kindergarten in Japan is an *educational institution* for preschoolers from 3 to 6 years old. Children go to kindergarten for two or three years, but 3 years has been the norm in recent years. Its history began at the end of the nineteenth century. Over time, the number of both public and private kindergartens increased. Families with a homemaker mother traditionally use the kindergarten because care hours are shorter than at day nurseries. Most kindergartens are open from 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., which makes them less attractive for working mothers. In 2020, 1,080,000 children were enrolled in 9,698 kindergartens. Although kindergartens and day nurseries historically have been entirely distinctive institutions run by different ministries, they are becoming more and more alike. According to Ben-Ari (2005) and Peak (1991), the two types of institutions follow different philosophies, styles and guidelines but provide similar learning experiences to children.

In 2006, a new childcare institution entered the stage. Given the growing demand for longer care hours and care institutions better adjusted to families' and mothers' needs, the Japanese government introduced ECCE centers (*Nintei kodomo-en*). These institutions offer four types of care: (1) there are hybrid institutions that combine kindergarten and nursery, (2) there are kindergartens with daycare function, (3) there are daycare centers that offer the services of a kindergarten and (4) there are local variants approved by the local government.<sup>5</sup>

In 2020, 43.2% of the five-year-olds were enrolled in kindergarten, 40.7% at nurseries and 14.4% at one of the new ECCE institutions. Only 1.7% of children did not attend any early childcare institution. For three-year-olds, the attendance rate is about 95%. Although almost all children of a given cohort are enrolled in childcare services, making it uncertain whether childcare policies can leverage the provision of institutional childcare to increase the fertility rate, the Japanese

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<sup>5</sup>In 2020, there were 6,093 type 1 institutions for about 786,000 children, 1,246 type 2 institutions for about 162,000 children, 1,164 type 3 institutions for about 110,000 children and 82 local institutions for about 5,000 children.

government has put forth a range of pro-family policies involving financial benefits for children and free services.

## Social Policies for Childcare

One of the primary drivers of social policies to restructure family life, parenting and childcare services is the fight against the declining birth rate (Boling, 2015). In this regard, Japan's policies are comparable to the social policies in Germany and other countries facing fertility crises. Consider that for the 2010 birth cohort, the representative Japanese *Longitudinal Survey of Newborns in the Twenty-first Century* (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare of Japan [MHLW], 2015) ( $n = 30,535$ ) shows that 30.9% of parents used childcare services (mainly nursery) for the 1.5-years-old child (second wave conducted in December 2011), and 39.7% made use of the childcare service when their child was 2.5 years old (third wave conducted in December 2012).<sup>6</sup> When their child had reached 1.5 years, 50.9% of the parents did not use childcare services because they did not have any needs, and 12.3% did not use services although they wanted to use them. At the age of 2.5, 44.7% of parents had still not used any services as they did not have any needs; 9.8% did not use childcare although they wanted to use it. For the 2010 cohort, about 77% of mothers were not regularly employed when their children were 1.5 years. In the following years, to increase childcare use, gender equality in employment and halt the lowering fertility rate, the Japanese government entirely cut the fees for childcare for children from three to five years old. Since 2019, kindergarten, daycare and ECCE centers can be used free of charge (with some exceptions). For low-income households, childcare is also free from infancy to 2 years.

Another crucial social policy is medical insurance for children. Japan has a universal social insurance system. For preschoolers, parents pay one-fifth of the total medical charges for their child's treatment, and the medical insurance pays the residual four-fifth. Some local governments (municipalities) provide more support; for example, in some places, the medical charge has been free for adolescents by 15 years old. These patterns vary with municipalities regarding income limitation, children's age and coverage of medical procedures (for example, allowing hospitalization or not).

In addition to the financial benefits of free childcare and highly subsidized medical care, the state pays parents a monthly childcare allowance (*Jido Teate*). In 2022, the monthly allowance amounts to ¥15,000 (ca. \$115 in January 2023) for children aged 0–3, and monthly ¥10,000 (ca. \$77) for ages three until finishing primary school (for the third or subsequent children, the allowance increases to

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<sup>6</sup>The *Longitudinal Survey of Newborns in the twenty-first Century* is a panel study conducted yearly by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare since 2001. A second cohort started in 2010 and is the basis for the statistics reported here. In the remainder of the chapter, we consistently refer to this survey as the *MHLW survey on babies born in 2010*. The 2001 cohort is used for comparisons in later sections of the chapter and referred to as *MHLW survey on babies born in 2001*.



¥15,000), and monthly ¥10,000 for junior high school students. Lower-income single parents receive additional benefits (*Jido Fuyo Teate*). Looking back at how primarily single mothers suffered from financial burdens attached to raising a child and having to work for a living, the new policies are certainly an improvement (Peng, 2003). Although some scholars criticize the low amounts of the various child allowances (Hagiwara, 2016), overall, the circumstances of raising a child have improved.

## The Growing Diversification of Childcare Arrangements

As discussed above, with the “age of the homemaker mother” slowly ending, the changing family patterns generate the need for parents to use professional care but still look for private care providers to cover the remaining hours. The *MHLW survey on babies born in 2010* provides the best estimation of how parents organize their children’s care needs. Table 1 shows the frequencies of parents’ use of different daily caregivers for children aged 2.5 years (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare of Japan, 2015). The table combines data from the *MHLW survey on babies born in 2001* and the *MHLW survey on babies born in 2010*. Parents were asked who is involved in daily care for their child, if the mother is working and if the mother is a homemaker. The questionnaire provided a selection of multiple

Table 1. Percentages of Daily Caregivers for 2.5 Years Old Children in the MHLW Survey on Babies Born in 2001 and the MHLW Survey on Babies Born in 2010.

	Mother	Father	Mother’s Mother	Mother’s Father	Father’s Mother	Day Nursery	Babysitter
<i>2010 cohort</i>							
Total	92.2	49.2	15.1	6.4	8.7	39.7	0.5
Working mother	84.5	53.3	20.3	8.6	11.6	77.8	0.9
Homemaker mother	99.2	45.9	10.6	4.3	6.1	5.9	0.1
<i>2001 cohort</i>							
Total	93.3	44.8	14.6	5.7	11.9	26.2	0.4
Working mother	82.0	44.4	22.7	8.8	18.3	65.7	0.9
Homemaker mother	99.4	45.2	10.2	4.0	8.4	4.8	0.1

Source: Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare of Japan (2015).

Note: The statistics for the 2001 cohort are based on  $n = 41,532$ ; the 2010 cohort comprises  $n = 30,483$ .

possible answers, including various caregivers within the (extended) family, paid care and institutional care. At first sight, the results for the two cohorts do not differ much. In both cohorts, mothers take the top share in care work, irrespective of their employment status. However, we can observe interesting differences between the first cohort and the second cohort a decade later in the involvement of fathers. In 2001 and 2010, fathers' care rates were around 45% when their wives were homemakers. However, in households with working mothers, fathers' participation in care work has increased in the 2010 cohort compared to 2001. The use of grandparents as caregivers seems somewhat random. It will likely depend on changing availabilities, although we can see that working mothers rely heavily on their mothers (i.e., the child's grandmother) to help with children's care. The use of day nurseries has increased substantially, especially among households with working mothers. This figure is about 78% in the 2010 cohort. Although it is often believed that grandparents fulfill an essential role when mothers are working, mothers don't rely on them as much as on daycare. In essence, the care work is now mainly done by the mothers and institutional care.

A recent survey reveals more details about changing patterns of how families organize childcare. The 16th National Fertility Survey ([National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022b](#): repeated cross-sectional survey) shows that working mothers with one-year-olds have received less support from the mother's parents in the years after 2000. Although grandparents still fulfill an essential role for working parents ([Yoda & Shintani, 2018](#)), social policies have gradually enabled working parents to organize childcare even if their grandparents are not readily available, a common issue in metropolitan areas like Tokyo.

We can observe similar trends in the *Nationwide Survey on Families and Children* (*Zenkoku Katei Doko Chosa*), conducted by the [National Institute of Population and Social Security Research \(2020\)](#). However, this repeated cross-sectional survey shows that grandparents still have an essential function in emergencies in childcare.

In households with homemaker mothers, child-rearing is mainly done by mothers, while using day nurseries with extended opening hours is less common, and the fathers are involved to some extent. Interestingly, unlike in many other nations where nonrelative care is more prevalent, the rate of babysitter use is tiny in Japan.<sup>7</sup> One reason why nonrelative caregivers are almost inexistent in Japan might be the government's long-standing unwillingness to introduce foreign domestic care workers. Therefore, as the number of working mothers is increasing, fathers' participation in care work and childcare is slowly becoming a social necessity, and traditional gender roles must adjust accordingly. For fathers

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<sup>7</sup>In Western nations like Australia, England and Germany, nonrelative caregivers like nannies and babysitters in early childhood are used by around 3%–5% of parents. In Canada, the numbers are even higher, with about 18% of children receiving unregulated, nonrelative care. However, statistics do not differentiate between young and older children (for an overview of the situation in Australia, England and Canada, see [Adamson, 2015](#); for Germany, see [de Moll & Betz, 2014](#)).

of preschool children, the average hours of household work (including childcare and other care activities) per day were 1 hour and 54 minutes in 2021. In contrast, this figure stood at 48 minutes in 2001 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan, 2022). Time spent on childcare was 1 hour and 5 minutes per day (and only 25 minutes [sic] in 2001). For mothers, the average household work per day was 7 hours and 41 minutes in 2001 and 7 hours and 28 minutes in 2021. The average childcare time was 3 hours, 3 minutes in 2001 and 3 hours, 54 minutes in 2021. Even though care work in Japan still is strongly gendered, these trends indicate that the gender division of household work is gradually leveling out. Interestingly, the average childcare hours of mothers were increasing even though fathers' participation increased. These trends may show intensive parenting.

One of the main factors maintaining the gender division of labor in Japan for many decades was men's long working hours (Brinton & Oh, 2019; Iwai & Inaba, 2000). However, in 2015, the Japanese government endorsed the *Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace* (*Josei Katsuyaku Suishin Hou*). This act requires companies to introduce corporate efforts to improve employees' work-life balance, encourage men to take parental leave and promote women to managerial positions. The latest trends in parents' organization of childcare might reflect the early effects of Japan's recent social policies geared toward greater gender equality and the restructuring of family life.

## Approaches to Child-Rearing in Early Childhood

Child-rearing approaches and practices are strongly influenced by normative beliefs, which shape adult-child relations at home and in institutions and influence peer interactions among children, especially in early childhood. In Japan, normative beliefs about young children and early childhood education seem somewhat paradoxical, given the strong emphasis on performance and conformity that shape the East Asian school systems (Yoda & Shintani, 2018). Japan has a pedagogical and ideological divide between preschool and school education. Although like in most OECD countries, the preparation for school has gained more attention in recent years, Japanese care institutions traditionally emphasize *sociability* and *playfulness* as critical educational goals. Children are believed to need nurturing and preservation as they are considered innocent and immature (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2014). Educational approaches in the family are mostly in line with professional goals and practices. Mothers and fathers emphasize kindness, sensitivity, politeness and smooth peer interactions as important educational goals in early childhood (Holloway & Nagase, 2016). In this section, we first take a closer look at approaches to childcare and education in institutions before moving on to educational beliefs and practices in the home.

Education and care practices in early childhood institutions in Japan have been at the center of research efforts for many years (Hayashi et al., 2009; Hoffman, 2000; Nakatsubo et al., 2022). In particular, comparative education and anthropology scholars have shown great interest in the Japanese approaches to

childcare and child-rearing. Tobin (2011) argues that as Japan is rapidly modernizing its institutions and society, people have become concerned about a potential loss of the Japanese culture and way of life. Since mothers have become more involved in the labor market and the family structure has changed over time, with institutional care becoming more important than care within the (wider) family, institutions are tasked with transmitting cultural traits, behaviors and beliefs that are viewed as traditionally Japanese (Tobin, 2011). Therefore, traditional cultural logics are deeply embedded in professional childcare practices in preschool institutions, even though they are not prescribed by the curriculum or government policies (Hayashi, 2011). As Tobin (2011, p. 20) puts it, early childhood institutions are “islands of cultural continuity in a sea of social change.”

Traditionally, Japanese preschool institutions prioritize extended times for play and free peer interactions with little direct instruction and interventions by educators (Lewis, 1995; Peak, 1991).<sup>8</sup> The noninterventionist approach of educators aims to foster children’s interpersonal skills, their problem-solving capabilities and provides various opportunities for peer learning. As Tobin (2011) points out, early childhood educators purposefully provide much time for free play to promote children’s emotional and social development. In addition, solidarity and taking care of others are especially encouraged in mixed-age interactions in day nurseries, where older children can interact with infants and teach them skills such as using the toilet without adult help (Tobin, 2011). Japanese educators often hesitate to intervene and rather stand by when children engage in physical fights unless there is a chance of physical harm. As Tobin (2005) explains, this can seem quite disturbing to the eyes of Western childcare professionals. However, educators’ noninterventionism reflects a conscious approach called *Mimamoru* (watch and guard), or *teaching by watching* (Nakatsubo et al., 2022). This strategy aims to promote children’s cognitive and social development (Hayashi et al., 2009). Interestingly, although widely practiced, the approach is not part of official guidelines. Still, when asked about their educational approach, educators explain that intentionally withholding an intervention allows children to develop sociability and explore the effects and consequences of their actions (Nakatsubo et al., 2022). Matsui (2021) explains that educators acquire the *Mimamoru* approach through experience and reflections with colleagues; educators also consider children’s feedback on play and relationships with adults and children. In this line, Hayashi and Tobin (2015) describe how early childhood

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<sup>8</sup>Jones (2010) traces the child-centered approach in Japanese pedagogy back to the 1910s and 1920s when educational reformers, kindergarten practitioners, children’s book authors and established middle-class parents advocated children’s freedom of expression and their right to play. During those years, public spaces, times and cultural content for children in Japan were significantly extended with the rise of kindergartens, playgrounds, children’s books, toys and the building of parks and zoos. Japan was much in sync with similar endeavors of reforming institutional pedagogy and child-rearing practices in the Western hemisphere (Kiuchi, 1997). Japanese scholars welcomed Western pedagogical concepts and translated and popularized the ideas of Ellen Key and others (Dahlgren, 1996).

educators have embodied specific feedback techniques and ways of teaching through facial expressions and gestures, allowing them to intervene or interact with children without physical contact. The practice of *Mimamoru* provides an example of a Japanese approach to early childhood education that shows how educators turn free play into social learning experiences for children. In addition, the practice can be seen as part of the more general approach of providing group experiences that foster the ability to interact harmoniously with peers. The notion that playtime is a significant learning opportunity is underpinned by the idea that children build social and emotional knowledge and skills by interacting with others and becoming aware of their needs and feelings (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010).

Prioritizing empathy, sociability and fun over promoting talents and early academic skills is not only a standardized approach in early childhood institutions but deeply embedded in parents' thinking. In the 16th National Fertility Survey (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022b), parents were also asked about their reasons for having children and their child-rearing goals. About 80% of parents said that they had children "because the presence of children makes life more fun." This figure has been consistently high since 2002, indicating that parents' purpose for having children is expressive rather than instrumental. Through the analysis of large-scale personal interviews, Holloway (2010) concluded that Japanese mothers generally did not prioritize developing their children's distinguished excellence but gave high weight to cooperativeness or independence. In a repeated cross-sectional survey conducted by the Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute in the years 2005 ( $n = 2,931$ ), 2010 ( $n = 3,431$ ) and 2015 ( $n = 3,838$ ), mothers of preschool children were asked about their educational goals (multiple answers). In each year, over 50% said they aimed to develop their child's sympathy with others, and around 45% indicated that they find it essential to spend much time interacting with their child. In contrast, "bringing out their talents" and "having them study numbers or letters/characters" were rarely endorsed by parents (less than 15%) (Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute, 2016). These numbers underscore Japanese parents' high emphasis on playfulness and sociability, thereby endorsing educational goals aligned with professional educators' goals and practices. Interestingly, the numbers also relate to findings from comparative research by Zhou et al. (2007), who showed that Japanese parents have lower expectations of their children's educational development in various other dimensions, such as willpower, morality and attention to diet than Chinese and Korean parents, thus putting less pressure on their children's development. Evidence from earlier psychological research into mother-child interactions in Japan found that Japanese mothers encourage their five-month-old children to make eye contact and interact more frequently with them than American mothers (Bornstein et al., 1985). In this line, Tamis-LeMonda et al. (1992) found that Japanese mothers routinely teach their older infants relatedness through pretend play, for example, by encouraging them to take care of a doll. In contrast, mothers in the United States spend more time on cognitive learning, e.g., by showing their children sorting toys.

Parental goals and styles seem to shift during the transition into primary school when competition and performance become more important in children's lives. The playfulness and emphasis on empathy that dominated institutional and parental care and education during the early years fulfilling the function of instilling Japanese culture, habits and styles in children give way to more performance-oriented approaches to parenting. At the same time, as children enter school, social inequalities increase in Japanese family life and the education system, while parental beliefs and practices are more similar in early childhood across social strata (Deuffhard, 2018).

## **Intensive Parenting and the Increasing Role of Extended Education in Early Childhood**

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the interplay of parenting and children's educational success has gained increased attention from social scientists and policymakers in Japan. Special attention has been paid to various forms of *extended education*. There are different understandings of extended education, which can either denote school-based educational efforts outside the formal curriculum or activities that extend children's learning *beyond* school. Our use of the term in this chapter refers to "activities implemented outside of the allotted school time, including before school, after school and during summer/winter vacation" (Kanefuji, 2020, p. 223). Extended education may be strongly linked to formal education, like private tutoring, or provide learning opportunities in areas that do not typically take center stage at school, e.g., athletics and arts. All activities have in common that they provide "organised opportunities for students to have educational experiences throughout the time not engaged in formal instruction" (Kobakidze & Suter, 2020, p. 1). For Japan, extended education is often referred to as shadow education, but the term usually refers to cram school or tutoring. There are two types of shadow education: Children either go to cram school (*juku*) or use correspondence education (*tsūshin tensaku*), an addition to the educational market that emerged in the 1990s. Correspondence education works like a remote *juku* with students receiving study materials by mail or online and submitting their assignments to the providers for feedback. Both types are fee-based, often aligned with state school education's contents and use similar forms of instruction (Stevenson & Baker, 1992). In this section, we focus on diverse activities under the umbrella of extended education that occur in children's lives outside of education (and care) institutions. Since globally, more and more children attend so-called "enrichment activities" (Vincent & Ball, 2007) from early childhood onwards, we chose to look at how frequently children attend different activities from 2.5 years old through the early primary school age. Over the past two decades, scholars have primarily discussed children's involvement in extended education as part of an intensive parenting strategy. Intensive parenting or "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2011) is a social phenomenon that was first observed in the United States, where middle-class parents tend to orchestrate their children's lives by enrolling them in a variety of educational activities, enriching

their out-of-school learning experiences with educational trips and engaging them in talks about school (Lareau, 2000, 2015). For Japan, Matsuoka et al. (2015) found that parents with a university degree tend to employ what Honda (2008) calls “rigorous” parenting, a form of intensive parenting that produces a growing level of effort in children during the primary school years. The general assumption among scholars is that extended educational activities tend to increase social inequalities in educational outcomes. Matsuoka (2019) ascribes the specific pattern of rigorous parenting in Japan to the characteristics of the education system.

In contrast to decentralized systems such as the United States and Germany, Japan’s education system is centralized, highly egalitarian and standardized in terms of curriculum and learning materials used by schools (Cummings, 1980). The funding of schools is spread equally over the 47 prefectures to avoid differences in learning opportunities between rural and urban, poor and rich regions. In addition, between-school tracking in upper secondary education induces a form of educational stratification that raises competition (LeTendre et al., 2003). At the end of junior high school, students take admission exams determining the high school that matches their demonstrated ability. The high-school track students attend is crucial for their academic future and life chances (Yamamoto & Brinton, 2010). The competition for an advantageous placement in upper secondary school is highly consequential, prompting parents to increasingly strengthen their children’s academic involvement as children progress through the late primary and lower upper secondary school years. Scholars have addressed this critical issue in various studies.

For example, Matsuoka (2019) reports three main findings. First, he finds that parents’ education level correlates with children’s participation in extracurricular activities, cultural activities and attendance of *juku* (*cram schools*) during the early primary school years. When children are in third grade, college-educated parents practice a form of “concerted cultivation” that resembles what Lareau (2011) described for the United States. Second, during the later years of primary school, parents decrease children’s participation in organized activities and increase the hours spent at *juku*. Drawing on Honda (2008), Matusoka (2019) argues that parents vary the way they cultivate their children intentionally by slowly adjusting children’s lives to the requirements of the education system. Third, as standardized testing becomes more critical in children’s educational careers, parents increasingly regulate children’s time spent on media use. They limit children’s time spent on cultural and extracurricular activities and encourage children to spend more time on academic studying. This pattern is more prevalent in families with highly educated parents. Finally, evidence of inequalities in the use of tutoring during the secondary school years is growing (Matsuoka, 2015), although at least some use of tutoring seems standard. Yamamoto (2015) showed that middle-class parents in Japan incorporate the heavy use of *shadow education* from very early on. Research by Shinogaya and Akabayashi (2013) shows that time spent on studying and private tutoring is shaped by socioeconomic status and positively linked to school performance in primary school.



Irrespective of these classed patterns in using *juku*, extended education plays a substantial role in Japanese children's lives, similar to most East Asian countries. Many parents are eager to promote their children's educational success (Yamamoto, 2015) and invest a lot of money in children's tutoring lessons. Therefore, attending a *juku* is common practice among both primary and (junior) high school students. In addition, many children participate in other forms of extended education. Table 2 shows the use of such activities for children aged 2.5–7.5, using data from the *MHLW survey on babies born in 2010*. At 2.5 years old, 14.2% of children attended some educational activity. This figure rises as children grow older. At the age of 7.5, when children are in the first grade of primary school, 81.7% take extended education classes. However, the declining use of activities other than cram school that Matsuoka (2019) observed for the later primary school years cannot be found during the transition period from early childhood into primary school. During these years, children's participation in any activity outside the family is generally growing.

There are also gendered patterns in children's activities. Swimming was the most frequent activity among boys across all ages; 19.2% used correspondence

Table 2. Children's Extended Educational Activities During Early Childhood and at School Entry by Gender and Age.

	Survey (Children's Age)	3rd (2.5)	4th (3.5)	5th (4.5)	6th (5.5)	7th (6.5)	8th (7.5)
Total of all children		14.2	23.4	38.5	56.6	74.9	81.7
Boys	Cram school			3.5	4.4	11.2	13.4
	Music			5	7.7	9.6	10.0
	Swimming			14.4	23.0	34.3	36.4
	English			9.2	11.7	11.9	12.1
	Correspondence education						19.2
Girls	Cram school			3.8	4.2	10.2	12.7
	Music			14.2	24.9	36.0	38.8
	Swimming			11.5	18.3	27.0	29.5
	English			11.2	14.1	15.4	15.7
	Correspondence education						21.2

Source: Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare of Japan (2022).

Note: The total numbers refer to the percentages of children doing any activities at a given age. A blank cell means that the category was not assessed. In the third and fourth surveys, participants were only asked if their children participated in any activities, which is why the information of specific activities is missing.



education, and 13.4% went to cram school at the age of 7.5. For girls, swimming was also a frequent activity for all ages, but music lessons (mostly piano lessons) were the most common. Correspondence education was used by 21.2% at age 7.5, higher than boys. Both for boys and girls, we can see nearly one-fifth used correspondence education, and more than one-tenth went to cram school in first grade. Gender differences can be found in music and sports, but not in educational lessons. Going to cram school was 30.4% for boys aged 10.5 years (fourth grade of primary school) and 31.0% for those girls. At the end of primary school, cram school has become the dominant out-of-school learning setting among children (Matsuoka, 2019). However, despite children spending extended time on learning activities during after-school hours, media use and free play are still highly prevalent in their daily lives. About 46.6% of first graders play video games on a given weekday; this figure is 74.5% among fourth graders. Playing video games becomes more common as children grow older. In fourth grade, about 52% play games for more than one hour per day, which is the case for only 28.8% of first graders.

## Conclusion

Early childhood in Japan is currently transforming in multiple ways. Current trends in how parents and institutions structure children's lives are closely related to societal changes. Above all, the dramatic decline in fertility has reshaped social policies regarding family structure, gender equality and care arrangements, with wide-ranging consequences for children's care and education arrangements. As a result, childhood is now more than ever taking place in institutions from soon after birth, and traditional family models and associated care arrangements within the extended family are in decline. At the same time, traditional values and practices are preserved by childcare institutions, which purposefully resemble child-rearing practices that have long been practiced in domestic care arrangements with multiple children and generations present (Tobin, 2011).

Early childcare and education institutions in Japan continue to emphasize sociability and free play. Educators implicitly teach empathy and relatedness to others. Parents share these values and practices during early childhood but become increasingly concerned with a more performance-oriented educational approach when children move on to primary school. As children enter the education system, social inequalities arise in child-rearing approaches and their participation in learning activities outside the home and school. Future research on early childhood in Japan could focus on at least three areas: *First*, more research is needed on how growing social inequalities in Japanese society, rising income inequality and growing immigration might also increase educational inequalities and produce ever-greater competition in the education system and beyond. Researchers will need to address how parents design early education and care arrangements aligned with traditional educational goals on the one hand and the characteristics of the education system on the other hand. McLanahan (2004) argued that changes in family structure, women's role in the labor market and

partnerships are accompanied by new social policies regarding gender equality and childcare, leading to “diverging destinies” in children’s lives. These transformations are gradually emerging in Japan.

A second question will be whether early childhood institutions can withstand rising competitiveness and uphold their cultural logics at odds with trends promoted by the OECD. The redesign of early childhood and care institutions into learning hubs geared at preparing children for life in ever-diversifying, competitive, market-oriented societies has already changed educators’ professional practices in many Western countries. Early childhood institutions are undergoing reforms turning them into vehicles of social mobility and school readiness. These trends may undermine the gentle introduction of children to Japanese traditions and personal interrelations still practiced by parents and educators today.

Third, this chapter has focused intensely on policies, recent changes in Japanese society and professionals’ and parents’ approaches to childcare and education. Thus, our analyses centered on the perspectives and actions of adults. How children perceive and experience the developments in their lives and their participation in education and care arrangements were not the focus of this chapter. The sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1990) has not yet developed strong roots in the Japanese social research environment (as an exception, see Isa & Shimizu, 2019; Fujita, 2015). Interest in representations of children and youth as social actors has existed in historical and cultural studies for many years. For example, scholars have discussed how teenagers’ agency unfolds in their online activities without adult supervision (Ito, 2010) and focused on how girlhood, representations of gender and childhood are intertwined in Manga and Anime (e.g., Castro, 2019). However, the education and care arrangements discussed in this chapter are rarely explored through children’s eyes. Ozaki (2016) interviewed teenagers about their involvement in the decision for a specific *Juku* and how they experienced their participation in high-school entrance examinations. The author shows how young people develop a sense of duty and commitment to *Juku*, which they feel contributes to their (future) well-being. The study illustrates and discusses a specific form of “conjoint agency” (Markus & Kitayama, 2003) embedded in Japanese culture that emphasizes a sense of social self within interpersonal relationships. How younger children in Japan view and experience care and education arrangements structuring their daily lives is an issue for future research to explore.

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