Parental Evaluation of Institutionalized Childcare: Survey Results from Japan

Barbara G. Holthus

German Institute for Japanese Studies Tokyo (DIJ)

Abstract:
This article presents the first results of a non-representative survey, conducted in 2008 among 350 parents with at least one child enrolled in a daycare facility throughout Japan. Questions geared to understand parental utilization of, opinions on, and satisfaction with institutional childcare, in particular daycare centers. Important findings are the persistence of traditional care giving patterns, with the role of the mother remaining to be highly dominant, even in dual-earner families. This is to a large degree linked to gendered employment patterns and workplace constraints. However the limited use and role of alternative caregivers is also a noteworthy element. On the other hand, survey results show the significance of grandparental childcare – not as substitute for daycare but in addition to the use of institutional childcare. The comparatively understudied role of grandparental care can be seen in their helping with daycare runs in the evening, in the case a child is sick and cannot attend daycare, and as full-time caregivers during the summer-vacation at elementary school. From a social policy perspective, this points to a continuing need for the provision of after-hours daycare and institutionalized childcare for sick children, as these seem to be the most significant deficiencies in the existing early child care and education system for dual-earner parents.

Keywords: Institutionalized childcare, work-life balance, daycare, dual-earner families, grandparents, babysitter, family policies

1. INTRODUCTION

The total fertility rate in Japan is far below the replacement level of 2.1

and below the OECD average[1]. Faced at the same time with rapid aging, policy makers try to reverse the trend and raise the fertility rates through numerous social programs and policies. But enticing their citizens to have more children is a difficult challenge.

Ever since Japanese policy makers have started to concern themselves with the declining birth rate – a trend that began in the early 1970s, but was not a public (or political) issue until 1989[2] – the provision and improvement of childcare, specifically daycare services, were at the forefront of governmental concerns and efforts (summarily called *shōshika taisaku* [low fertility countermeasures])[3] and has remained an important issue.

In addition, as recent as 2007, the Japanese government, specifically the Cabinet Office (Naikakufu), turned to the improvement of people's work-life balance as the latest possible solution in the fight against the low birth rate. That is why, in December 2007, the government created the so-called Charter for Work-Life Balance and the Action Policy for Promoting Work-Life Balance, and announced the year 2008 as 'Work-Life Balance *Gannen*', meaning the inaugural year of work-life balance. Specific goals of the work-life balance charter include: increasing the employment rate of women and the elderly, reducing part-time work and overtime, and increasing the rate of people taking their annual paid leave from currently 47 to 100 percent.

Yet obstacles in implementing these goals are plenty, such as insufficient financial backing by the government and a charter that 'lacks teeth'

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[1] Calculated from the fertility rate of 25 countries (OECD 2008).

[2] In this year the total fertility rate fell to the then peace-time record low of 1.57. The media coined the term "1.57 shock" to accompany this process with waves of articles on the fertility issue. For more information, see Naikakufu (2009: 2–3).

[3] In regards to improving the day care system, the government developed several plans (e.g., the Angel Plan and New Angel Plan). For detailed information on the dozen plus policies and measures, see Naikakufu (2009: 28–33).

because penalties for non-compliant companies are non-existent (Holthus 2008a).[4] In addition, an increasing number of women get higher education and thus want to pursue careers in larger numbers. Yet combining parenthood, and particularly motherhood, with employment is very difficult. How parents actually do so on a day to day basis is still understudied.

Combining the two elements of child care and work-life balance, I conducted a nationwide, non-representative survey among parents who have at least one child enrolled in a daycare center. This paper aims to facilitate understanding of how these elements actually play out in peoples' everyday lives. Questions of the 2008 survey were geared to help understand parental utilization of as well as experience and satisfaction with institutionalized child care services, and thus the parents' actual work-life balance, their challenges of combining employment with raising children, as well as the roles, use and necessities of other caregivers beyond the net of parental and institutionalized child care. This is the first presentation of the findings of this survey. Further analyzes are to be published elsewhere in 2011.

2. Low Fertility and Parental Employment

A major contributing factor to the declining fertility rate in Japan is the fact that many women delay having children to a later age. In Japan, the fertility rate of women aged 20 to 24 and 25 to 29 has greatly declined.

[4] The work-life balance campaign of the Cabinet Office urges people to change and improve their personal work styles, suggesting that making a daily To-Do list and trying to keep meetings to one hour, for example, can lead to changes of people's lives. But the efforts are put solely into the hands of individual employees, freeing companies of their responsibility to do their part: "A no-cost idea with a cute mascot – but with a doubtful outcome" (Holthus 2008b: 1).

The fertility rate of women aged 30 to 34, on the other hand, has actually increased slightly since 1975, and the rate of women aged 35 to 39 even more so.[5]

In Japan, low fertility is first and foremost a problem of nuptuality; that is, a problem caused by the delay or the abandonment of marriages. Yet, in recent years, the concern has also focused on the decline in marital fertility. Not long ago, marital fertility in Japan had been well above the replacement level of 2.1. Recent years however have seen slight decreases here as well, and it remains to be seen how this will develop in the future (Shibata 2008).

Other factors influencing the fertility rate – factors that are not limited to Japan – are poor economic performance and instability of labor market conditions, which lead to uncertainty about the future among the population (and thus further delay in starting a family). Furthermore, Japan has seen rising costs of children and their education. Changes in women's life courses are also "blamed" for the decline in the fertility rate, most notably higher education levels of women, higher rates of female labor force participation, and an increasing number of women in career-track positions, even though quite low if compared to other industrialized nations.

The younger the child, the less likely women are to work. A large proportion of mothers quit their jobs for a while at the time of childbirth, returning to the job market once the children are older. Full-time employment rates for mothers are low; the majority of them are employed part-time.

In Japan we still see the persistence of fairly 'traditional' ideals of how mothers and fathers should allocate their time and roles in balancing work and family life. These ideals favor the father as sole breadwinner, and the wife either as a full-time housewife or, if needs be, a part-time employee. The saying that children best stay with their mothers until the age of three is also a persisting stereotypical view on childcare ideals. However there is also a noticeable shift in the ideals of parental participa-

[5] See Kōsei Rōdōshō. http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/jinkou/suii03/brth1-2.html (last accessed 28 January 2010).

tion of childcare and household matters. In a large-scale survey conducted among Japanese fathers in the years 2005 and 2009, it becomes clear that fathers' way of thinking has changed and that the desire to participate more than before is clearly noticeable (Benesse Institute for the Child Science and Parenting 2010; http://www.benesse.co.jp/jisedaiken/). However even though ideals are changing, "reality" shows that fathers' participation has barely changed at all to the better, and in some instances has even declined. For example, whereas the percentage of fathers playing inside with their children has declined by 4.1 percentage (from 46.8 percent down to 42.7 percent), the percentage of fathers helping to clean up after the meal has increased by 4.3 percent, from 28.8 to 33.1 percent.

Nonetheless, the number of double-income families is on the rise. Today not only single but also married women are in the labor market in higher numbers than before. In Japan, since 1996, the number of dual income family households has superseded family forms in which the father is the sole breadwinner and continues to increase up to now (Naikakufu 2008: 56).

As can be seen in Table 1 below, in the case of children in the household, significant differences of mothers' employment status can be identified depending on the age of the children and the type of household. The employment rate of mothers is 45.5 percent in households of parents and children only, whereas in three-generation households the percentage lies at 65.4 percent, and is as high as 77.1 percent in the case of mother/child(ren) households. In regards to the age of children, the younger the child the less likely the mother is to work and the more likely a father is to work. Furthermore, in the case of children under the age of one, in only 20.5 percent of nuclear families are both parents employed, whereas in three-generational households it is 31.4 percent of the parents. So mothers' employment seems to be more achievable in the living arrangement of a three-generational household, where other family members, such as grandparents, can assist and thus make childcare easier.

Table 1. Parental employment by marital status and age of children

	Age of child	TOTAL*	Father and mother employed	Only mother em-ployed	Only father employed	Mother and father unemployed
Parents and unmarried child(ren)	**TOTAL**	8,810	45.5%	0.9%	52.5%	0.9%
	0–1	912	20.5%	0.3%	77.6%	1.3%
	1–6	3,186	34.7%	0.6%	63.6%	0.9%
	6–18	4,712	57.7%	1.2%	40.1%	0.8%
Single parents and unmarried child(ren)	**TOTAL**	659	-	77.1%	10.3	11.5%
	0–1	3	-	33.3%	-	66.7%
	1–6	123	-	75.6%	6.5%	17.9%
	6–18	533	-	77.7%	11.3%	9.8%
Three-generation households	**TOTAL**	3,100	57.3%	8.5%	31.0%	3.0%
	0–1	191	31.4%	1.6%	61.8%	5.2%
	1–6	846	43.3%	9.2%	43.0%	4.3%
	6–18	2,063	65.4%	8.9%	23.2%	2.3%

* per 1000.
Source: National Women's Education Center (Dokuritsu Gyōsei Hōjin Kokuritsu Josei Kyōiku Kaikan) (2006: 27).

Of the full-time employed Japanese women who quit their jobs to raise their children, only 9.2 percent successfully re-entered the job market later as full-time employees; 90.8 percent of the women had to re-enter as irregular, non-full-time employees (Nihon Fujin Dantai Rengōkai 2007: 81).[6]

Naturally, if the ratio of dual-earner families is increasing, then the need of parents of young children for external help in child care is also

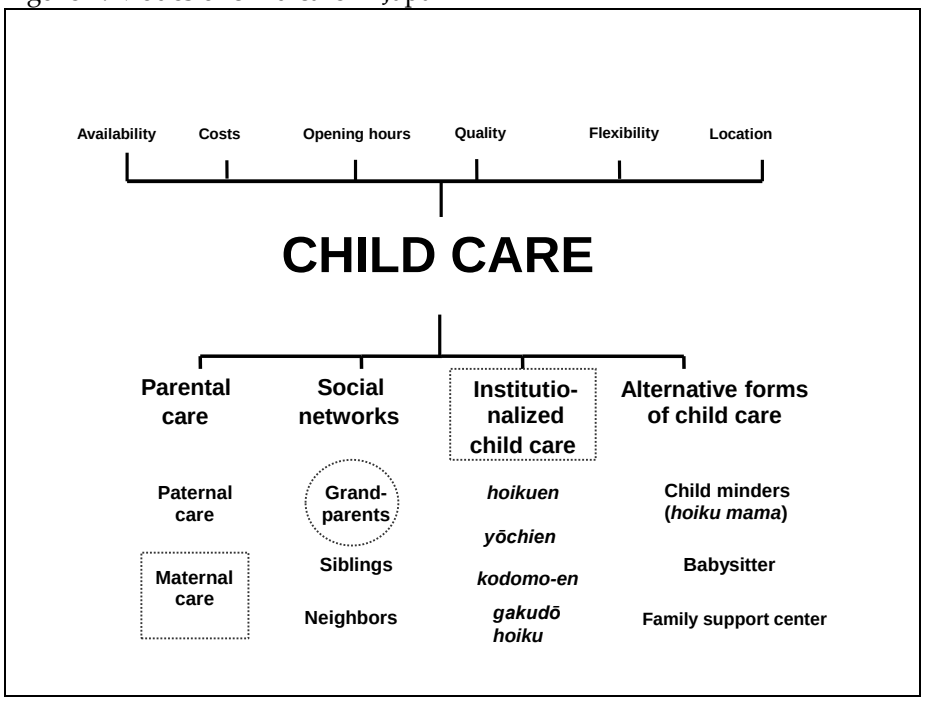
[6] For more detailed information on female employment in Japan after marriage and child-birth, see the survey results published by the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT 2008).

increasing, because parental child care is limited due to the parents' working hours. Child care, namely institutionalized child care, helps to keep women in the labor market and, more importantly, makes it possible in the first place. Even though academic research on the correlation between child care and fertility rate development remains equivocal, governments nonetheless think that the investment in daycare as part of the social policy mix helps efforts to increase the fertility rate.

3. Institutionalized Child Care

For Japan, child care can be divided into four main forms: parental care, social networks, institutionalized child care, and alternative forms of child care (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Modes of child care in Japan



Source: Adapted from Hank and Kreyenfeld (2003).

In terms of parental care, the majority of work in Japan is still done by mothers.[7] In regards to social networks, besides siblings and neighbors, it is the role of grandparents that is most significant here. Alternative forms of child care are child minders (*hoiku mama*), babysitters, and – in recent years – family support centers. However, the role of these alternative forms is still very limited. And while the government is trying to increase the number of *hoiku mama* many fold in the near future, quality concerns among the public remain.

In terms of institutionalized child care, Japan still has a bifurcated system (Oishi 2008; Zhou, Oishi and Ueda 2002). In Japan the fundamental distinction for pre-school education/child care is between *hoikuen* [day care centers] and *yōchien* [preschool/kindergarten]. Since 2006 a third type of institutionalized pre-school child care has been created, the so-called *kodomo-en*.[8] The main foci of and differences between the three forms of pre-school institutionalized child care are listed in Table 2.

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[7] In Japan, fathers' involvement in housework and child care up to age 6 is 33 minutes per day on average for child care and one hour total including housework. This is by far the lowest figure among the US, Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, and Norway. In Germany, for example, fathers spend on average three hours on housework, of which 59 minutes are spent for child care (Naikakufu 2008: 60).

[8] The fourth element listed under institutionalized child care in Figure 2 is *gakudō hoiku* [after-school care for school-age children]. However, *gakudō hoiku* is omitted below because a detailed analysis of this type of child care would go beyond the scope of this paper. Yet see chapter 4.7 below for a brief description of the perception of *gakudō hoiku* by parents with children who are still in daycare.

Table 2. Comparison of institutionalized child care options in Japan

CATEGORIES	Daycare center (*hoikuen*)	Kindergarten (*yōchien*)	*Kodomo-en*
Age of cared for children	Ages: 0–6. Earliest enrollment is 57 days after birth, but only 5% of all children in daycare are younger than age 1	Ages 3–6	Ages 0–6. First centers were established as recently as 2006 and are a success
Ministry affiliation	Under the authority of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare	Under the authority of the Ministry of Education	Under the joint authority of both ministries
Goals	Care, not necessarily education	Education takes much higher priority here than in the *hoikuen*	Combines education with extended care hours
Hours	Full-day care available, mostly for 9–11 hours (private *hoikuen* even longer)	Usually part-time care, about 9:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; extended care until 5:00 p.m.	Both part-time and full-time care available
Parental work situation	Exclusively for dual-earner families	Full-time employment not possible with these hours, thus mothers are often full-time housewives	Possibility for full-time employment of both parents

Hoikuen care is available from as early as the 57th day after birth, until as late as the child's entry into elementary school at the age of six. They operate under the authority of the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, and as a result their main focus is on providing full-time care on behalf of working parents, even though in recent years some *hoikuen* have added some educational aspects into their care programs. Their original aim – the first *hoikuen* was founded in 1900 – was to aid poor working-class parents by providing basic care for their offspring.[9]

[9] See Uno (1999) for a detailed account of the history of *hoikuen* and *yōchien* in Japan. See

Yōchien care is for children ages three to six, and are under the auspices of the education ministry. The most significant difference between these two child care forms is the opening hours. *Yōchien* have very limited opening hours, on average only until about 2:30 p.m., which does not make them an option for full-time working parents. And whereas *yōchien* focus on early childhood education, *hoikuen* were designed exclusively as care facilities for children of two-earner families or single (working) parent families and thus have extended opening hours until evening.

The declining fertility rate in Japan is reflected in the declining demand for *yōchien*. Their enrollment figures have steadily dropped since as early as 1975. At the same time, however, the number of children in *hoikuen* has been growing, underlining an increased need for such facilities. Each year, the deadline for parents seeking to place their children in public *hoikuen* is at the end of January, and the term starts on April 1, mirroring the Japanese school system. Yet many children cannot find care: a total of 19,794 children remained on the waiting lists of public daycare centers in 2006 (Holthus 2008c), and their number increased to 25,384 children in April 2009 (I-Kosodate Netto 2009). This bears testimony to the fact that, due to the rise in the number of dual-earner families, the need for institutional child care continues to increase – despite declining fertility and the so-called 'new zero waiting list' policy enacted by the Japanese government in 2008 (Naikakufu 2009: 29).

Moreover, there are many regional variations of the waiting list with a clear urban-rural divide. Whereas in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area demand for child care and thus the number of children on waiting lists are extremely high (7,939 children in Tokyo-to; 1,293 in Chiba-ken; 3,245 in Kanagawa-ken; 1,509 in Saitama-ken), several other prefectures have no children at all on their waiting lists, including Yamanashi, Fukui, Ishikawa, Miyazaki, and Toyama. It comes as no surprise that the fertility rate, broken down by prefectures, shows Tokyo as having the lowest fertility rate in the country with 1.05 in 2007 (Naikakufu 2009: 7).

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also Shirakawa, http://www.childresearch.net/PROJECT/ECEC/asia/japan/report10_01.html and Holthus (2009).

As noted above, reforms of this bifurcated child care system are under way. Most importantly, in October 2006, the first *kodomo-en*, a unique mix of *hoikuen* and *yōchien*, were opened. *Kodomo-en* are under the joint authority of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare – an important 'first' in politics – and combine education with extended care hours like day care centers, which makes them a viable and highly attractive option for working parents. Already by August 2007, less than a year after the first *kodomo-en* opened its doors, the number of *kodomo-en* had risen to 105 nationwide, showing an early success for this new concept. The subsequent development however has been less speedy as expected with a total of 358 *kodomo-en* in 2009.[10]

In regards to *hoikuen,* it is important to understand the diversity among them. First of all there is a basic distinction between licensed (*ninka*) and unlicensed (*mu-ninka*) daycare. Among licensed daycare centers, a further distinction has to be drawn between private and public facilities. Unlicensed daycare centers are all private, be they for profit or non-profit. Public daycare centers remain highly popular in the population, particularly due to their low costs for the parents. Yet they are costly for the governments to operate. Therefore what can be seen as a trend in recent years is a move away from public daycare centers, towards more private care. Not having to run a public facility themselves, with expensive employees and rent of the location, local governments save significant sums of money if they only pay subsidies to private-run facilities, rather than running the facilities themselves.

Public daycare centers charge fees based on parental income and are on average cheaper than privately-run institutions. They also have shorter opening hours on average. While public daycare centers are open until 7 or 8 p.m. at the latest, private, licensed facilities are often open as late as 10 p.m. Currently, public daycare service is provided for 20.3 per-

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[10] Shirakawa (http://www.childresearch.net/PROJECT/ECEC/asia/japan/report10_01.html) points to the problems of implementation and sees their establishment from a more critical standpoint.

cent of children under the age of three.

4. Parental Survey

4.1 *Methodology*

As noted above, I tried to reach out to people who have first-hand experience with child care issues and daycare, in order to understand better how parents maneuver through parenthood, employment, their social networks and institutions, namely their companies where they are employed as well as the institution of daycare.

I conducted a qualitative and quantitative survey in 2008 with a sample of parents who have at least one child in a public or private day care facility (*hoikuen*).[11] Survey sampling also took regional variations of day care experiences into consideration. In the first stage, five *private* daycare centers were selected through a convenience sample of personal contacts. Their selection does not present a regionally representative sample. Informal permission was obtained from each of the centers.

The selection of *public* daycare centers aimed at maximum diversity: rural and urban areas, suburban areas, regional centers other than Tokyo, and facilities in Tokyo proper (from the urban metropolitan centre of the city to the outskirts). First, I defined seven large rural regions, and then chose one prefecture each, which was considered representative for each of the regions: Okinawa, Miyazaki, Okayama, Shiga, Gifu, Tochigi, Akita. Second, for surveying the urban area, I chose Tokyo and, in order to achieve variability for this large city, I split it into four sub-regions. Third, for rural and urban areas, I chose another non-Tokyo industrial area, Amagasaki, as well as two non-Tokyo regional areas, Sendai and

[11] As public daycare centers charge fees based on parental income and are on average cheaper than privately-run institutions, the type of *hoikuen* can be one of several helpful markers for social stratification indicators of parents.

Fukuoka. This made a total of 15 areas, from which to choose public daycare facilities. Permission was eventually granted by eight (seven)[12] public daycare facilities, which comes to a total of 13 private and public daycare centers. Of the private daycare facilities, three are in Tokyo (Shinjuku and Shibuya districts), two in Shikoku (Ehime and Kagawa prefectures), and one in the city of Naha in Okinawa. The public daycare facilities are located in: Utsunomiya city, Tochigi, in Urayasu city, Chiba, in Hiratsuka city, Kanagawa, in Seki city in Gifu, in Ōtsu city in Shiga, in Amagasaki in Hyōgo, and in Fukuoka city, Fukuoka prefecture. Sample size and return rate varied from a sample size per daycare facility of as low as 16 to as large as 150. Overall, the public daycare centers are significantly larger and can care more a greater number of children than private centers. The return rate ranged from 13 percent to 81 percent. Overall, in this nationwide yet non-representative sample, out of a total of 1,215 parents contacted, 350 parents responded (a response rate of 29 percent) to my questionnaire of 48 questions.

The survey questions focus on general information about the parents (demographics, employment, working hours, etc.), their day care selection process for their children, how they combine daycare drop-offs and pick-ups with their work schedules, their additional usage of babysitter services and other care givers, their opinion on their personal work-life balance, a consideration of their future situation (once their children entered elementary school), their general thoughts on the institutionalized child care system, and finally thoughts on governmental efforts in helping with the improvement of work-life-balance and fostering an increase in the birth rate (*shōshika taisaku*).

[12] One daycare facility assumed to be public turned out to be private, but is one of those centers for which care spaces are distributed through the local governments. Even though they are privately run, the parents pay the fees from the public pay-scale.

4.2 *The Parents: Demographics and Employment*

At the time of the survey, the 350 parents had a total of 623 children. This makes a (survey) fertility rate of 1.78, which is much higher than the national overall TFR of 1.37 (as of 2009), though significantly lower than the national marital fertility rate of 2.09.[13]

The majority of surveyed mothers and fathers were born in the 1970s, with the fathers overall being slightly older than the mothers (see Table 3). The mothers were born between 1957 and 1988, with the majority being born in the 1970s. The fathers were born between 1952 and 1988, also with the majority being born in the 1970s.

Table 3. Parental age distribution

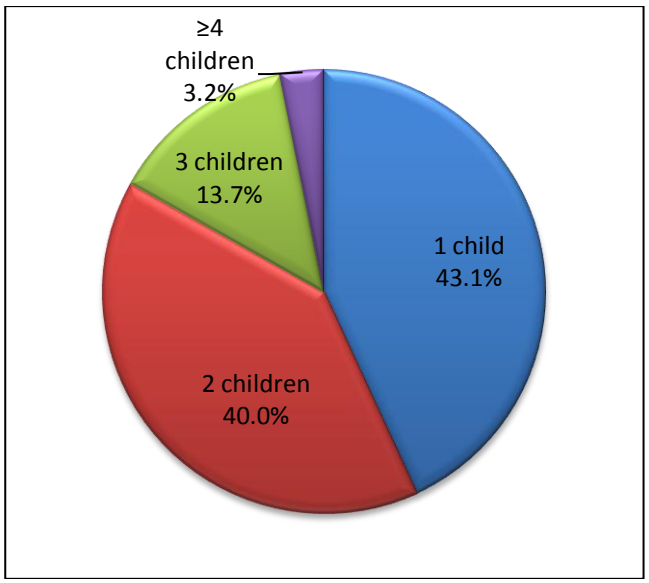
Birth cohort	**Mother**	**Father**
1950–1959	2 (0.6%)	10 (3.4%)
1960–1969	88 (26.2%)	113 (38.2%)
1970–1979	215 (64.0%)	157 (53.0%)
1980–1989	31 (9.2%)	16 (5.4%)
TOTAL	**336 (100.0%)**	**296 (100.0%)**

Their first children were born between August 1984 and January 2008.[14] As is revealed by Figure 3, the majority of parents have either one or two children. The highest number of children in a family is six (0.3%; one family only).

[13] This difference could be due either to the fact that parents may yet have further children, or that the sample population of this survey over-represents dual working parents.

[14] Second children were born between 1993 and 2008; third children between 1999 and 2008.

Figure 2. Number of children in the sample households



Number of children in household	Frequency (%)
1	151 (43.1%)
2	140 (40.0%)
3	48 (13.7%)
4	8 (2.3%)
5	2 (0.6%)
6	1 (0.3%)
Total	**350 (100%)**

In order to understand the constraints in parental work-life balance, it is important first to understand their employment situation and status, which overall follow a fairly "typical" pattern. Almost four out of five fathers are in regular employment (78.6 percent), whereas as much as 32.5 percent of mothers are employed as part timers (see Table 4).

Table 4. Parental employment

Employment status	**Mother**	**Father**
Regular staff	151 (44.2%)	232 (78.6%)
Part-time worker	111 (32.5%)	10 (3.4%)
Temporary worker (*arubaito*)	14 (4.1%)	6 (2.0%)
Self-employed	26 (7.6%)	36 (12.2%)
Not employed	13 (3.8%)	2 (0.7%)
Other	27 (7.9%)	9 (3.1%)
TOTAL	**342 (100.0%)**	**295 (100.0%)**

In terms of occupation, 60.1 percent of fathers and 41.7 percent of mothers are professional, technical, managerial, or official workers. Yet 31.2 percent of mothers are employed in clerical positions (in contrast to only 8 percent of the fathers), which correlates with their high part-time employment rates in the general population.

It is not surprising then that overall much more fathers than mothers regularly work long hours. Whereas 71.2 percent of fathers work 8 to 10 hours daily, and 22.2 percent between 11 and 15 hours daily, about half of mothers work 8 to 10 hours (49.1 percent), and only 1.2 percent work longer hours (see Table 5). An even bigger difference lies in overtime work. Only 54.3 percent of mothers work overtime, whereas an astounding 99.6 percent of fathers do. And while the majority of mothers work overtime only between one and four times per month, the majority of fathers work overtime almost every day.

Table 5. Parental working hours

Average daily working hours	**Mother**	**Father**
0 (not working)	4 (1.2%)	2 (0.7%)
1 to 7 hours	160 (48.5%)	17 (5.9%)
8 to 10 hours	162 (49.1%)	205 (71.2%)
11 to 15 hours	4 (1.2%)	64 (22.2%)
TOTAL	**330 (100.0%)**	**288 (100.0%)**
Overtime work (yes/no)	**54.3%**	**99.6%**
Length of overtime in hours per day	**Mother**	**Father**
1 to 4 hours	114 (85.0%)	164 (80.0%)
5 to 9 hours	12 (9.0%)	28 (13.7%)
10 hours and more	8 (6.0%)	13 (6.3%)
TOTAL	**134 (100.0%)**	**205 (100.0%)**
Frequency of overtime per month	**Mother**	**Father**
1 to 4 times	57 (41.6%)	21 (10.0%)
5 to 9 times	30 (21.9%)	31 (14.7%)
10 to 14 times	23 (16.8%)	38 (18.0%)
15 to 19 times	9 (6.6%)	29 (13.7%)
20 and more times (daily)	18 (13.1%)	92 (43.6%)
TOTAL	**137 (100.0%)**	**211 (100.0%)**

What the survey data point to is that overall fathers are employed more often in full-time positions, have higher-ranking occupations, and that their working hours (including overtime) are significantly higher, compared to mothers.

4.3 *Institutional Child Care*

On average, the first-born children were 16 months old when their parents placed them into daycare. Of the children that entered private daycare facilities, 41 percent entered before the age of one (12 months old), but only 20 percent of the children in public daycare entered before they turned one. Of the 350 parents, 144 (41.1 percent) had their children in a private daycare facility, and 206 (58.9 percent) in public daycare.

Parents were asked in qualitative questions about the different existing forms of daycare, and what they considered to be the advantages

and disadvantages of each. The differences turned out to be marked. For public daycare, the most significant advantages mentioned were the low costs (60 parents) and the quality of care (71), in particular the long experience of 'veteran care givers' (*beteran no hoikushi*); as disadvantages they cited short opening hours (63) and an overall inflexibility (daytime PTA meetings, strict rules and regulations, high degree of bureaucracy). For private daycare centers, the most frequent disadvantages mentioned were high cost (63 parents) and that staff were often young and inexperienced (17). These disadvantages, however, were outweighed by the advantages: long opening hours (46), educational aspects, flexibility, and individuality (45), and good quality (62).

Parents were also asked about their second-hand knowledge and opinions of *kodomo-en*. Even though the news media has to a certain extent reported on this new type of daycare, numerous parents did not yet know anything about them (e.g. "*Yoku shirimasen"*). However, all parents who were aware of *kodomo-en*, had only heard positive things (e.g. "*Ichiban ii. Sorezore no ii tokoro o riyō dekireba ii."*). Several mentioned that they wished a *kodomo-en* would open in their area, so that they could send their child there (e.g. "*Totemo yoi to omou. Chikaku ni areba iretai."*).

Asked about their motives for choosing either public or private daycare, respondents revealed that their choice was not only influenced by space availability first and foremost, but also by quality of care, opening hours, but also to a significant extent by location. Proximity to home was considered important as it has the potential to significantly affect morning and evening commuting times. Parents ranked ten possible selection criteria on a five-point Likert-like scale from "very important" to "not important at all". The results are listed in Table 6.

Table 6. Criteria for selection a particular daycare center

Selection criteria	**Percentage of parents considering this as "very important"**
Location (close to home)	73,7%
Location (close to work)	28.3%
Space availability	74.1%
Quality of care	70.3%
Length of opening hours	38.1%
Size of daycare center	10.3%
International approach	3.6%
Student-Teacher ratio	9.1%
Outdoor facilities	29.1%
Other	52.7%

In the "Other" category, most often the costs for care were mentioned. Another frequent aspect is that of quality of food, which also was noticeably important to parents. Further mentioned here are: Cleanliness, safety, if the daycare center has Western toilets, the atmosphere of the center and staff, if the center is sensitive towards children with allergies, if the center takes children with disabilities, and if the staff has a general understanding of working parents' constraints.

4.4 *Parental Care Versus Grandparental Care*

Questions here geared particularly towards grandparental care – its extent and what it encompasses – and are of utmost interest, as this is seemingly the least well-researched aspect in regards to child care in Japan.

In recent years, however, some research in Japan has identified the importance of grandparental child care, in particular the surveys conducted by the research institute of Benesse Corporation (Benesse Jisedai Ikusei Kenkyūjo). One survey, conducted in 2006 (Benesse 2007), included questions on the involvement of grandparents in child care. It has to be noted though that among the sample population in this survey only 18 percent of parents had their children in regular institutionalized care,

and that the survey was limited to expectant mothers and parents of children up to the age of two. In another survey by Benesse from 2007, the sample is nationwide and was conducted among working mothers with children up to age one. This second survey showed that if the grandparents live close by, they have a strong presence. However, the survey also identified cases in which the grandparents are still working themselves, so that even though they might live close by, they cannot help out at short notice, for example when the child is sick (Tamago Kurabu and Hiyoko Kurabu 2008: 81, 108–109). Proximity, therefore, is not the only indicator for the possibility or likelihood of grandparents being able to help with child care duties.

In my own survey, the household composition is slightly different from the national data. In my sample population all parents have children. Therefore, to make the data comparable, I calculated the national percentages leaving out households without children (see Table 7, right column). My survey over-represents nuclear family households by 10 percent. Three-generational households are only slightly over-represented. However, when analyzing the extent of grandparental involvement in child care, it is important to factor in how far away grandparents live from the nuclear family in those cases where they do not live together. I found that half of all grandparents live within a one-hour travel radius from the family, which (theoretically) allows them to help out when necessary.[15]

[15] The survey did not ask whether grandparents are still actively employed, thus possibly preventing them from care-giving. Also not inquired about were health status or other factors that could prevent care-giving as well. Future surveys focusing on grandparental care giving in particular should consider these elements as well.

Table 7. Distribution of household form

Own survey data		**National average data (2000)**		
Household forms	**Cases (%)**	**Household forms**	**%**	**% with children**
Single mother + child	32 (9.2%)	Single parents + children	8	15.4
Single father + child	1 (0.3%)	Parents + children	32	61.5
Mother, father, child	251 (71.9)	Three-generational households	8	15.4
Three-generational, with maternal grandparents	33 (9.5%)	Households together with other relatives	4	7.7
Three-generational, with paternal grandparents	25 (7.2%)	Single households	27	–
Household together with relatives other than grandparents	7 (2.0%)	Couples without children	21	–
TOTAL	**349 (100%)**	**TOTAL**	**100**	**100.0**

Source**:** Own survey data; Takeda and Kinoshita (2007: 21).

Several questions in my survey focused on understanding the role of parental care versus grandparental care, and their significance in adding to, not substituting, institutional child care. These questions were geared towards identifying (i) the child care provider during the period before enrollment into daycare, (ii) the child care provider responsible for the daycare runs twice a day, and (iii) the child care provider during a child's illness and its often sudden inability to attend daycare.

Care giver pre-daycare: For the question 'Who provided the majority of care for your child before you enrolled him/her in this daycare center?' multiple answers were possible (see Table 8). In the overwhelming majority it

was mothers who provided care for the child before enrollment in a daycare center. Fathers were indicated as care givers in 15 percent of cases; however, this occurred only in combination with the mother as additional care giver. Grandparents were checked in a total of 22 percent of the cases, with the parents of the mother taking a larger role than the parents of the father.

Table 8. Care giver before daycare enrollment

Care giver*	**Cases (%)**
Mother	307 (87.7%)
Father	52 (14.9%)
Grandparents (mother's side)	54 (15.4%)
Grandparents (father's side)	23 (6.6%)
Other public daycare center	11 (3.1%)
Other private daycare center	43 (12.3%)
Child minder (*hoiku mama)*	3 (0.9%)
Other	18 (5.1%)

Note: * Multiple answers were possible.

Daycare runs: The question on who does the daycare runs in the family shows that, in the mornings, the majority are mothers (78.6 percent), with only 32.6 percent fathers (114) taking their child to daycare in the morning. However, when looking at how many fathers are solely responsible for taking their child to school in the morning, the number falls to just 13 percent (47 fathers). The grandparental role in the morning is rather limited (8.6 percent).

In the afternoon or evening, the percentage of mothers collecting their child from daycare (see Table 9) is even higher than in the morning (84.9 percent). The same goes for the share of grandparents, which is also higher in the afternoon/evening (from 8.6 percent in the mornings to 20.9 percent in the evenings). This reflects the parents' longer workdays, which makes picking up children very difficult, particularly for fathers since they are the ones with the greatest amount of and most frequent overtime.

Table 9. Care givers for daycare runs

Care giver*	Morning drop-off	Afternoon/evening pick-up
Mother	275 (78.6%)	297 (84.9%)
Father	114 (32.6%)	90 (25.7%)
Mother and father together	15 (4.3%)	21 (6.0%)
Grandparents	30 (8.6%)	73 (20.9%)
Other	7 (2.0%)	23 (6.6%)

Note: * Multiple answers were possible.

Sick child care giver: When a child is sick and cannot attend daycare, the prevalence of maternal care, even among these mostly working mothers, is again obvious (83.4 percent). When the children are sick, it is usually up to the mothers to call work to ask to stay at home for the day. Sick child leave is usually up to the mother as only very few fathers manage to pitch in and take days off work when the child is sick. So it is usually the mother who has to inconvenience her co-workers when she calls in sick. Taking into consideration how much one inconveniences fellow colleagues is strong among mothers and fathers, but mothers report having more understanding colleagues than the fathers do.

The role of grandparents too is revealed through these three questions. Their role becomes most significant in the event of their grandchild becoming sick. In 51.4 percent of cases grandparents were checked as taking over full time as care givers (see Table 10).

Table 10. Sick child care givers

Care giver*	Cases (%)
Mother	292 (83.4%)
Father	88 (25.1%)
Grandparents	180 (51.4%)
Family support center	9 (2.6%)
Babysitter service	14 (4.0%)
Other	44 (12.6%)

Note: * Multiple answers were possible.

All these factors point to a significant role of grandparents in care-giving, even though the children are in day care. Thus in Japan it is not so much an either/or choice between daycare and grandparental care, but rather a combination of both that is often relied upon by working parents.

4.5 *Alternative Care Options*

Last but not least, the survey results clearly show that caregiver options falling under the category of 'alternative care givers' (see Figure 1 above) play only a limited role. For example, asked whether they had ever used a babysitter, parents indicated obvious hesitation, antipathy and even anxiety regarding babysitters in the qualitative comments they gave. Very few parents (42) had ever employed a babysitter (12 percent). The most frequently voiced concerns were: 'I can't entrust my child to a stranger', 'I can't trust a stranger in my house/apartment, while I am not home', and 'A babysitter is too expensive'. Some parents also mentioned that they did not have any information about the availability of babysitters and thus had not used them (yet). However, asked about their level of satisfaction with their babysitter, the overwhelming majority of parents who had experience with babysitters was 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' (27 of 41 parents, 65.9 percent) and would use one again.

4.6. *Parental Thoughts on Family Policies*

Parents were very vocal on qualitative questions about how they think the government could improve their work-life balance and thus make it more attractive for parents to have children. The main points, in order of frequency, are as follows:

(1) *Financial support*. Parents wanted, among other things, day care to be made cheaper and/or free; medical care for children to be provided for free; child support payments to be increased; child care

leave to be financially supported by the government; and support for babysitter services to be provided.

(2) *Improvement of workplace conditions*. Parents suggested that overtime work be reduced or prohibited; companies that force employees to work overtime be punished; working hours be shortened and made more flexible; and more work sharing and parental leave be provided, in particular for fathers. These answers express a desired value change in gender roles.

(3) *Improvement of the* hoikuen *situation*. Suggestions included reducing waiting lists, providing sick child daycare, making daycare cheaper, prolonging opening hours, and improving the overall quality.

(4) *A more child-friendly environment*. Suggestions to improve or create a more child-friendly environment included more parks and child-safe streets.

4.7. *A Look Into The Future: After School Programs*

Last but not least, a couple of questions in the survey provide a look into the future and ask how parental work-life balance is likely to change when their children will enter elementary school. Whereas some private *hoikuen* could be open until 10 p.m. the latest (public daycare centers only stay open until around 7 p.m.), *gakudō hoiku* (after school programs) are only open until 6 or 7 p.m. the latest. Furthermore, after-school care is still far from being provided at every elementary school. Asked how the school schedule (hours/vacations) will work with their work schedules, parents overwhelmingly (76.3 percent) think that it will be worse or less convenient than the daycare schedule. Only 3 parents (0.9 percent) think it will be better and 8.6 percent believe it will be about the same as their current daycare situation.

Asked if they intend to enroll their child in an after-school program in elementary school, 41.7 percent of the parents do so, and another 23.4 percent who might enroll their child.

Parents were asked to provide also some qualitative statements to

the situation of after school programs. Here, the two biggest problems mentioned by the parents are the long summer vacations in elementary school and that even after-school care only goes until 6 p.m.. Many parents express fear of the elementary school period. e.g. *"I am scared, I want to stay in my job, but the times just won't work out. A real problem."*

Some parents explain their strategies in dealing with their children's elementary school period:

- Several parents hope for the help of the grandparents to cover for the time after school until they return home from work.
- *"I am thinking of either giving my child to the grandparents or possibly sanson ryūgaku* (=sending the child off to a mountain/village resort for an extended period of time). *If I use the family support center to help cover the period between gakudō and when I get off work, that is pricy and therefore a problem."*
- *"Summer vacation at elementary school is the big problem. I am thinking about gakudō hoiku, summer swim camp and the grandparent's house."*
- *"I will need to change to part time in my job then, I think."*
- *"I will become a freelance worker once my child enters elementary school, so that I can work at home."*

Once again the need for grandparental help in child care becomes quite clear. Also the topic of after school care points to the fact that maybe solving the daycare problem is only the first part of the low fertility solution package. Once children enter elementary school, finding an agreeable work-life balance becomes even more difficult, at least that is the fear by the parents. Thus efforts from the side of the government should not stop at the improvements to the daycare situation. And it seems that the gov-

ernment is reacting to that, as the number of after school care programs has been announced to significantly increase over the next few years.

5. Conclusion and Outlook

As the number of double-income families in Japan is on the rise, it is to be assumed that the provision of daycare is also a concern for an increasing percentage of these families. Thus this issue is of growing social importance and therefore highly relevant for understanding contemporary Japan.

The analysis of parental working hours showed that work-life balance remains a struggle and a serious obstacle for married couples when deciding to have more children. In my survey the parents pointed to the need for multi-level government aid. As the survey was conducted before the financial crisis of late 2008 hit the global economy, it remains to be seen what long-term effect it has on parents' everyday lives. It can only be assumed that the growing strain of the labor market increasingly affects parents negatively.

The findings of the parental survey concerning the role of the different forms of child care can be summarized as follows:

- 'Traditional' patterns of care-giving persist (i.e., the prevalence of maternal care versus paternal care).
- In international comparison, institutionalized care in Japan is already fairly good with relatively high quality and the existence of a private child care market. Yet, from the point of view of parents, there is still ample room for improvement: demand for more and cheaper/free child care, a reduction in waiting lists for public day care, extended hours, and sick child care.
- Care-giving in numerous forms by grandparents in Japan is an understudied but significant element in caring for Japan's young –

even today. The fact that grandparents to a large degree help out when the child is sick points to a great need for institutionalized child care facilities for sick children, so that the burden lies not so heavily on mother, (fathers,) and grandparents.

– The two main arguments against not using babysitters are that parents considered them too expensive and see them as strangers and therefore hard to trust. Grandparents on the other hand seem ideal to fill that gap, since their ultimate advantage can be seen in the fact that they are free and that parents can trust them.

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