

## EDITORIAL

### Being a father in Japan

A comparative survey on parenting in Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the United States, France and Sweden by the National Women's Education Center, Japan, underscores problems that Japanese fathers must deal with. The problems range from the few hours they spend with their children, and their dependence on wives for disciplining their children, to their lack of preparation to be fathers in the first place. Social circumstances may be responsible for some problems, but fathers can help themselves by raising their levels of awareness.

The 2005 survey carried out by NWECC, an independent administrative agency, covered about 1,000 parents with children 12 years old or younger, in each of the countries named.

The survey found that Japanese fathers spent an average of 3.1 hours a day with their children -- compared with 3.3 hours in a 1994 survey. This amount of time was the second shortest after South Korea's 2.8 hours. By contrast, Thai fathers spent 5.9 hours -- the longest -- followed by 4.6 hours in both the U.S. and Sweden, and 3.8 hours in France.

The reverse side of the story is that Japanese mothers spent the longest amount of time -- 7.6 hours -- with their children, followed by 7.1 hours in South Korea, Thailand and the U.S., 5.8 hours in Sweden and 5.7 hours in France.

Work hours put in by Japanese fathers are clearly responsible for the situation. On average, they worked the most at 48.9 hours a week, followed by 48.8 hours in South Korea. Swedish fathers averaged the least at 37.7 hours. Forty-one percent of Japanese fathers complain about the lack of time spent with their kids, up from 28 percent in the previous survey.

Heavy work burdens are depriving many Japanese fathers of chances not only to play with their children but also to have dinner with their families. Children deprived of hearing conversations between their fathers and mothers may be missing important cues

for developing the social discipline demanded of adults as well as the strength, perseverance, wisdom, ingenuity, etc., also required of adults outside the home.

The survey also shows that Japanese fathers tended to delegate responsibilities for their children's discipline and education to their wives. Only 11.9 percent of Japanese fathers attended meetings of parents and teachers in kindergarten, the second-lowest rate after South Korea's 7.9 percent. Swedish fathers' attendance was highest at 54.7 percent, followed by the U.S. (35.6 percent), Thailand (29.8 percent) and France (26.9 percent).

While 80.5 percent of Swedish fathers taught good manners to their children, only 53.4 percent of Japanese fathers did so. Corresponding rates were 72.5 percent in France, 66.3 percent in the U.S., 62.8 percent in South Korea and 48.1 percent in Thailand.

At a time when Japanese fathers are expected to cooperate with their wives in family life, the burden of bringing up children appears to be falling mainly on women. Still, fathers may be able to improve the situation with a change in attitude.

The survey shows that only 10.1 percent of Japanese fathers prepared or helped to prepare meals, compared with 45.6 percent in Sweden, 34.8 percent in the U.S., 27.6 percent in Thailand, 27 percent in France and 20.4 percent in South Korea. Japanese fathers appear to lack the time either for cooking and having dinner with family members or for acquiring the knowledge and skills to prepare meals.

Another point in the survey is that Japanese children seem less self-reliant than their counterparts in other countries. The survey posed this question: When your children reach 15 years of age, do you think they'll be able to prepare meals for other family members? In Japan, 54.9 percent of the parents said yes, compared with 85.2 percent in Thailand, 84.3 percent in Sweden and 78.3 percent in the U.S.

Asked if their children would be able to work and earn money for their families, only 14.9 percent of Japanese parents said yes, compared with 81.3 percent in the U.S., 49.3 percent in Sweden and 42.8 percent in Thailand.

The survey found that many fathers in Japan, South Korea and France have not had an experience that might have prepared them better for fatherhood. For example, 52.5 percent of Japanese fathers said they couldn't recall any such experience, compared with 74.1

percent of South Korean fathers and 58.2 percent of French fathers. A near-zero percentage of Japanese fathers said they had baby-sat in the past, while 16.7 percent of U.S. fathers and 24.8 percent of Swedish fathers had done so.

The survey indicates the importance of encouraging enterprises as well as the government to strive to reduce work hours so that fathers can participate more in family life. At the same time, it points to the need for Japanese men to change their thinking about work and their roles in the family.

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