

Consumer Co-operative Institute of Japan
Plaza F 15, Rokubancho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo
102-0085, Japan
Tel. 81-3-5216-6025 Fax. 81-3-5216-6030
ccij@jccu.coop
<http://www.co-op.or.jp/ccij/>

Main
Features

Co-op Provides Child Rearing Support Dr. Deborah Steinhoff

Introduction

Throughout Japan, Co-ops are developing schemes and activities to support child rearing. Japanese consumer co-ops are an ideal organization for this with their highly organized system and wide reaching membership. Co-op's long tradition of working with parents and children in the community to educate them about food safety and nutrition has earned them respect and trust. Building on this reputation, Co-op has expanded their social services to include organizing child rearing support schemes. While some Co-ops offer full daycare others offer Child Rearing Support Circles once or twice a month for mothers and preschool age children. Many of the child support services being offered rely to a great extent on volunteers within the community. The need to provide a support network for parents has now grown so great that Co-op is facing a juncture on how to proceed in the future with regard to staffing and financing. This article discusses the expanding need for child rearing support in Japan and Co-op's role in trying to meet these needs within their communities.

Contents;

Main Features: _____	1
Co-op Provides Child Rearing SupportDr.Deborah Steinhoff	
News in Brief _____	9-10
• Robert Owen Assn. Elected Vice Chair and Managing Director	
• 4 th ICA Asian Co-op Research Conference in Colombo	
• JSCS Conference Discussed on Organizational Changes of Japanese Co-ops	

Child rearing in Japan has traditionally been the sole responsibility of mothers. In a hierarchical competitive society, the pressure to have children succeed academically is very strong. Japanese society has traditionally expected mothers to raise their children with only family support and mothers believed that they were failures if they had to turn to outside help. In fact, it was only in the last decade or so that the need for an extensive daycare system, both private and public, was a necessary development to support working mothers. The decrease in family support as the number of three generational families has decreased has put a lot of social pressure on young mothers, which led to the need for Child-Rearing Circles. So although gender roles are still strong and mothers are responsible for child rearing, the private and public sectors have stepped-in to give support to mothers who no longer can rely on learning child rearing skills from elders in the family.

Japan has lagging behind in providing support for nuclear families, which are isolated and feeling the economic and social strains as a result of Japan's long economic downturn. It was during the mid 1990s, in fact, that Japan began to face the changes that were occurring to the family structure and recognize that child abuse was a growing problem throughout the nation. While in 1990, there were just 1,000 reports of child abuse reported, by 2002 the number was 24,000 and now it is estimated that there are 35,000 cases or more of abuse annually according to the Child and Family Research Institute. Although there is no way of telling if more abuse is going on or more are just being reported because of an increased awareness, the numbers are shocking and unacceptable in a nation that traditionally emphasized family and safety. The reasons behind the increase in child abuse is now being seriously addressed by both the governments and civil society. It has become apparent that mothers are not getting enough support in terms of child rearing and the pressures are proving to be more than they can handle. Feelings of isolation and frustration with no one to turn to for help can lead a mother to abuse her child if she does not have the parenting skills to cope with her situation.

Co-ops were among the first organizations to recognize the need for child rearing support and many Co-ops began to organize groups among their members in the 1990s.

Inadequate provision for child rearing support within societies is not unique to Japan, as it is a common problem facing many advanced nations. The fact however that consumer co-ops have taken a major role in providing child-rearing support is unique and is of great interest in light of the child rearing dilemma that Japan now faces.

Changing Demographics and Transition

The challenge that Japanese society now faces with developing support for child rearing is also deeply connected to declining birthrates in addition to socio-economic changes as Japan struggles with their traditions in the face of transition. Briefly, Japan is facing a real historic juncture with a rapidly aging population alongside sharply declining birth rates. The percentage of people over the age of 65 has reached 20% of the population, while children aged 14 or under has declined to 14%. Child birth has reached an all time low. The number of babies born to every woman during their reproductive years was at 1.29 in 2003 and 2004 (The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare Reports that minimum rate of 2.07 is reportedly needed to avoid a population decline). So if the current low birth levels continue and current immigration patterns remain unchanged, The Japan Aging Research Center predicts that Japan's population will shrink by about 30% from its current 127.7 million to 88.3 million by 2050.

At the core of these demographic changes are women and the choices they make. Whereas traditionally, young women, educated or otherwise, worked only until they married, today more and more women are challenging these conventions and are choosing to not marry and stay in the workforce. Working women are choosing to not take on the responsibility of raising children because even if they work, gender roles within the family still place responsibility for rearing children directly on their shoulders. Women face many obstacles and a lack of support for taking on the responsibility of work and parenting. Both the private and public sector in Japan is lagging behind in supporting families in terms of child rearing. In a society where mothers have traditionally been responsible for child rearing, the need for, and concept of a joint child-rearing endeavor of parents/mothers and society has not existed. There is a need for joint endeavors to support nuclear families and especially women. Co-op is playing an integral role in working to develop joint endeavors with parents within their communities.

Co-op schemes have developed against a backdrop of government policies and plans over a little more than a decade that have aimed to give support to working women and encourage them to have children. In addition to the introduction of policies such as maternity leave and child rearing leave, day care and tax exemptions for children, the government introduced the Angel Plan in 1994 and a new Angel Plan in 1999 which were a series of measure to encourage people to have children and to improve child-rearing related services. The plans included the doubling of support centers for child rearing and significant increase in the number of daycare facilities and extended hours for child care facilities by 2004. The new plan also called for changes in the employment environment to balance employment with child rearing. Some analysis point out that there is a disconnect between government programs and community initiatives at the regional and local levels where NPOs and Co-ops have stepped in to meet the needs of the community in terms of offering support for child rearing and are not aware of government subsidies due to poor communication.

The relatively recent development in the growth of Child Rearing Support Circles has led to an increase in the number of people working and volunteering in areas of child care and the adult education. In 2001, the government amended the Social Education Law to make adult education careers open to current volunteers in the field and allowed leaders of child-rearing circles and other people who carry out activities that support child-rearing to be officially recognized and participate in social education administration. Furthermore, the government revised the Law Concerning the Welfare of Workers Who Take Care of Children. Also in 2003, the government enacted the Law for Measures to Support the Development of the Next-generation, which requires both public and private entities with more than 300 employees to draw up an action plan.

Child-Rearing Support Circles

The Japanese call them Kosodate Hiroba. In English, the literature and reports refer to them as Child Rearing Support Circles, Child Rearing Salons, and Childcare Support Centers. Here Kosodate Hiroba will be referred to as Child Rearing Support Circles. It is important to note that there are many different types of Child Rearing Support Circles. These circles are a scheme in which mothers and babies/preschool children visit a designated place (public premises, co-op's meeting rooms etc) for a small or no fee. Under the direction of a leader, mothers come together in a group where they can freely discuss child rearing concerns or seek the advice of consultants while their kids play nearby. The primary role of these circles is for mothers to connect with other mothers, learn together and from each other and avoid isolation, which often happens in nuclear families. In general the circles meet once or twice per month. Co-op is not the only organization in Japan to organize circles. Some are organized by government agencies, both regional and local, some are community supported, some are privately supported and others are supported by Co-ops. In fact there are currently over 6,000 Child Rearing Support Circles throughout the country.

Co-ops began to organize circles in the 1990s when it first became apparent that child abuse, with kids being left home alone, not fed and hit, was on the rise. In the densely populated high rises in the suburbs of Japan's major metropolitan centers, it is all too common for young mothers to not know anyone in the community, nor be able to turn to anyone for advice or support. Co-op recognized this void in the community and stepped in to organize support circles. While these circles gradually started to grow at Co-ops throughout the nation in the nineties, it really was in 2000 that some Co-ops became very actively involved in organizing Child Rearing Support Circles. From there the news of this type of support scheme began to spread and the number of Co-ops and the number of Circles spread and grew throughout the nation.

Co-ops pursue different paths in terms of how they approach child/ parent support services. Both Chiba Co-op and Fukui Co-op are developing Drop-in Centers at Co-op stores in addition to Support Circles. Because operating Drop-in Centers requires permanent staff, these co-ops are collaborating with the government to obtain subsidies. Chiba Co-op is working in conjunction with the Chiba Prefectural government, while Fukui Co-op also collaborates with other non-profit organizations. In particular Fukui Co-op is developing a scheme where Co-op provides the facilities and the staff, while management is entrusted to local non-profit organizations. Co-op Drop-in Centers are following inline with the policies of national government's New Angel Plan which in part aims to support parents in their child rearing needs and reduce the incidence of latch-key kids, child abuse and juvenile delinquency.

It is important to realize that there are many different types of Circles which are started for different reasons and to fulfill different needs within a community. Co-op offers people the place and support staff to organize these circles. For example, there are Circles for mothers with disabled children. For example in Hokkaido one mother's isolation led her to form such a circle for mothers with disabled children. It meets twice a month with the goal to offer play time and artistic expression through painting, which not only benefits the children, but also serves as a place for parents to network and share information.

In 2004, the Japanese Consumer Co-operative Union conducted a survey to investigate the extent of the growth and the services being offering. The survey was distributed to 90 Co-ops of which 70 Co-ops responded. Among the 70 Co-ops, 62 or 89% indicated that they have Child Rearing Support Circles in place. The survey indicated that 41 Co-ops have designated facilities for Circles, and 47 Co-ops offer volunteer activities such as different activities for children and mothers. In addition, 39 Co-ops organize lectures and workshops, while 25 Co-ops also offer daycare or drop-in centers. The survey was very revealing in terms of the breath and scope of different Co-op's Circles. The findings show that Co-op Kobe, the nation's largest Co-op has 38 different Circle locations, while Miyage Co-op has 22 and Meikan Co-op has 12. The majority of the Circles/ Salons meet once to twice a month while some Circles meet four times a month.

In terms of financing the Circles, Co-ops request a minimal membership fee of 3,000 to 5,000 yen per year. From the survey only 4 Co-ops indicated that they are subsidized by local governments. And of these, they use the subsidy to rent facilities or to hire consultants and specialists. For the most part, however, Co-ops are operating their Circles independent of government support. JCCU does offer subsidies and a few Co-ops indicated that they do use these subsidies. Co-ops that offer drop-in daycare or babysitting all charge 500 to 1000 yen per hour in addition to their minimum annual fees. Although initially Co-ops restricted membership to Co-op members, more and more Co-ops, seeing the need in the community at large, have opened their Circle activities up to non-members.

Challenges in Organizing Child Rearing Support Circles

Co-ops acknowledges that they are facing many challenges in terms of organizing and sustaining Child Rearing Support Circles. After more than a decade of experience in this field, Co-op is now looking at their basic values to see where the development of Support for Child Rearing Circles fits into their organizational goals and business plans. While Circles for the most part have relied on volunteer power, the growth of Circles has now led to a discussion on incorporating them into Co-op Business Plans. Many factors come into play of which, information networking, financing and staffing are most crucial. Nonetheless, Co-op has identified key issues that need to be addressed in their efforts to organize Child-Rearing Support Circles. First and foremost is the need to improve and co-coordinated information sharing. There is need for comprehensive community based resource data and information which then feeds into a central data bank. Such a data bank is necessary to efficiently and effectively meet the needs of the community and eliminate overlapping services. While Co-ops have been developing a Co-op data and information sharing network, there is no one comprehensive resource source for all organizations involved in family support and child care. The most common mistake in the establishment Circles is that groups do not have all the necessary information about a region before they set-up the Circle. Research is important to determine where an organization fits into the big picture. It is also important to be in touch with all the local agencies that deal with children. These include, child welfare, health services, family support and home support programs. In addition to the local government, it is important to be aware of all the public and private daycares and kindergartens in the region. As is often the case, child care groups are often not aware of each other and therefore services are being duplicated where organizations should be supporting and enhancing each other.

Information sharing is also important so that organizations can understand the neighborhood and environment in which they operate. Organizations cannot fill the gaps in society without seeing the whole picture. For example, a community may have a need for a circle for single moms, or grandparents, or fathers in addition to stay-at home moms. The challenge is therefore to make sure that childcare networks foster support among all caregivers within a community through sharing information,

Staffing Child Rearing Support Circles and child care facilities is a big challenge as there is a lack of trained professionals in this field and Japan does not have sufficient programs to train people to be circle leaders and child care facilitators. Establishing permanently staffed Drop-in Centers has proved to be very difficult. Although the Social Education Law was amended about 5 years ago, people who work as Child Rearing Support Circle Leaders are not considered professionals. Japan is past the stage of relying on volunteers to fill the need for parent and child support organizations and is in need of developing a more easily accessible training system to train “Family Life Educators.” There is a real need for more professionalism in the field of child rearing support.

From Co-ops point of view, although there is an official handbook that outlines how to set-up Circles, Co-op recognizes the need for each Co-op to define their own goals and purpose and how their activities contributes to the community. On the practical side, Circles must draw-up financial plans that include staffing. They must also secure appropriate meeting places and equipment. Developing an information network, and offering and coordinating staff development and training cannot be stressed enough. Finally equal sharing of information among all staff and support people is essential.

Child Rearing Traditions and New Needs

There is dissonance between expectations to follow tradition and the demands of modern day reality in terms of child rearing women face. This is evident in a questionnaire that Kanagawa Co-op conducted in 2004 in which they asked mothers whether they believed it was essential for mothers to stay home with their children until the age of 3. Seventy percent of all the mothers answered that they believed that is was essential for mothers to stay home and take care of children. It is a widely believe assumption in Japan that Japanese women, once they become mothers must stay home and accept this course regardless of their individual situations or aspirations that might dictate otherwise and that if you cannot fulfill this duty on your own without outside help that you are a failure in society.

Co-op activities and programs, in the past, also neglected to support mothers in their child rearing challenges and instead focused their support on enriching children's intellectual life, providing field trips, cooking classes, seminars of various issues and study groups. Activities grew to include teaching parents and children about basic nutrition. Support for child rearing, from infant to kindergarten, was an unknown field because even within Co-op they took it for granted that this was a mother's responsibility. Looking at the situation of Japanese women today it is easy to empathize with them, the dissonance they have between what is culturally expected of them and what they are realistically capable of in the modern world. Child Rearing Support Circles have become a culturally acceptable way to support mothers in Japan.

Conclusions

Child Rearing Support Circles are still in an infantile stage and will undoubtedly expand tremendously in the near future. In order to expand, Co-ops are discussing how they fit into business plans and identifying ways to better manage the circles. Co-ops realize that they need to work together with all forms of NPOs and government to have a coordinated effort to provide family support within communities. Co-ops also realize that they have not fully explored utilizing public funds and the potential that this offers in terms of developing Circles. At present only two percent of Co-ops are utilizing public funds. While circles are providing a much-needed service in society, there is the need to develop a network with other nonprofit and government organizations and clearly define the goals of the scheme.

In Japan, a child's right to be reared is rarely talked about. While the balance between work and home is now widely debated, it has only been very recent that how child rearing fits into the big picture has been considered. Japan is a country that is being forced to seriously consider what can be done to encourage the birth of more children and provide more support within society for parents with children. Child Rearing Support Circles are proving to be a small, but essential part of the solution.

*This article was based on information provided in Review of Consumer Co-operative Studies, (Special Issue on Child Rearing Support Networks), April 2006.

About the author: Deborah Steinhoff, Ph.D. Hokkaido University, previously lived in Japan and worked for Co-op while raising her son in the 1990s.

News in Brief

Robert Owen Assn. Elected Vice Chair and Managing Director

The Robert Owen Association (ROA) held its AGM on June 10th where Prof. K. Yoshida of Kogakuin University was elected Vice Chairperson and Mr. A. Kurimoto, was elected Managing Director for one year terms. At the meeting, preparations for the ROA's golden jubilee in 2008, which coincidentally will be 150 years after Robert Owen's death, were discussed. This was followed by presentations by Associate Prof. T. Sugimoto on 'Footprints of Co-operation in the UK and Mr. T. Suzuki on La Fraternelle and Co-operative Exchange in 19th century France.

4th ICA Asian Co-op Research Conference in Colombo


The Fourth ICA Asian Co-op Research Conference was held August 15-16 in Colombo in conjunction with the ICA Asia and Pacific Regional Assembly. Ca. 50 researchers and co-operators from 10 countries took part.

The themes of the Conference were:

---Natural Disaster Preparedness and Rehabilitation in Community through Co-operative Initiatives.

---The Role of Co-operative Leadership in Preservation of Co-operative Identity

In all 25 papers were presented in 6 working sessions. In the closing session, a draft constitution of the ICA Asia Pacific Committee on Co-operative Research was presented for consideration. It will be formally approved in the next Regional Assembly in 2008. As at the last Conference, scholarships were provided by the Consumer Co-operative Institute of Japan. This time 10 papers were selected from 30 applicants.



News in Brief

JSCS Conference Discussed on Organizational Changes of Japanese Co-ops

The Japan Society for Co-operative Studies held its annual Conference on Sept. 30 - Oct. 1 at Niigata University. The symposium discussed the organizational problems of co-op's reorganization as it faces changes in communities. Prof. Aoyagi (Niigata Univ.) made an introduction, which was followed by presentations by Mr. Kurimoto (CCIJ), Ms. Yamauchi (JCCU), Prof. Ishida (Mie Univ.) and Prof. Masuda (Shiga Univ.). Comments and lively discussion followed. Prof. Y. K. Woo, Vice Chair of the Korean Society for Co-op Studies, presented a special report on inter-co-operation among grass-root co-ops in Wonju. The second day ca. 20 monographs were presented and the local symposium featured co-op's strategies for rice marketing in the new environment created by policy changes.