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Author(s)	Kudo, Haruka
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Community-Based Child-Rearing Support for Families: Based on an Investigation in Sapporo, Japan

Haruka KUDO

Abstract: Against the backdrop of a high proportion of mothers who take care of their children at home and the problem of child-rearing anxiety and social isolation among them, the Japanese government has currently expanded child-rearing support via the Community-based Child-rearing Support Centers (CCSCs). They are open spaces for infants and parents in the community, where they can gather freely, communicate with each other, and share their anxieties and worries related to child rearing. There are also many voluntary programs that are similar to the CCSCs in each region, and all of these are often called “childcare salons.” In this study, I categorize these childcare salons into 4 types based on their management bodies, namely, the center type, children’s hall type, Hiroba type, and local-based type. Based on a qualitative investigation conducted in Sapporo, a Japanese urban area, I briefly summarize how these childcare salons support child rearing by “full-time mothers” and affect the formation of their childcare support networks. These childcare salons are diverse in terms of staff members and volunteers, space and facilities, and their opening hours. These features characterize the institutional support provided by these salons, which affects the relational support mutually provided among mothers who avail these services; therefore, different types of social exchanges and network formation are prevalent among the users. These childcare salons embody the idea of the “socialization of childcare” and practically “socialize” child rearing by moving it from the private sphere to the public sphere outside the family and by sharing it among families and people in the community. However, there are still issues and limitations with respect to gender division and family responsibility of childcare.

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1. Child-rearing family with infants in Japan

In Japan, the majority of infants are cared for by mothers at home. Although the double-income and one-parent households have been remarkably increasing, breadwinner/homemaker households have still maintained considerable proportions in terms of families with young children. Among the households with children under 6 years of age, nuclear families with a working father and a non-working mother account for 43.4% and reach 49.1%¹ among households with children under 3 years of age (Japan’s

1 While the nuclear families with both working parents comprise 27.3% and one parent 3.0%.

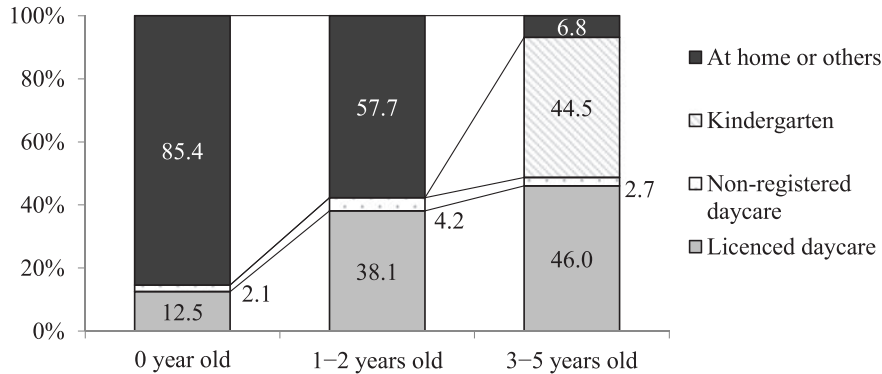


Figure 1. The rate of preschool children availing childcare services

Source: MHLW [2015a, 2016a], MEXT [2015]

national census 2010). Moreover, only 12.5% of children aged 0 and 38.1% aged 1-2 used public subsidized day-care services in 2015, i.e., most infants are taken care of at home (see figure 1).

With the shortage of public day-care supply especially for children under 3 years of age in urban areas, nearly a half the married women in 25-39 age group are not working, and the Japanese female employment rate still retains the M-shaped curve [Cabinet Office 2016:6]. On the other hand, it is pointed out that long-hour work practices keep Japanese fathers away from childcare.² Fathers in families with children under 6 years of age spend 39 minutes a day for childcare on an average while mothers spend about 3 hours [MIC 2011]. Also, there is a considerable gap in the take-up rate of childcare leave between women (81.5%) and men (2.65%) in 2015 [MHLW 2016b: 11]. These facts imply the unequal distribution of childcare responsibilities by gender as well as the existence of a constant number of mothers who are taking care of their young children at home.³

Moreover, regarding gender attitudes, 77% of married women agree that caring role of mothers, namely, that “Until the child is around 3 years of age, the mother should not work but concentrate on looking after the child” [IPSS 2014]. This principle is known as the “myth of the first three years.” As Ochiai, Yamane & Miyasaka [2007] described, “(In Japan) the norm that mothers of young children should be devoted to child rearing is still dominant, and the employment pattern of the M-shaped curve has not collapsed. On the other hand, mothers who are devoted to child rearing lose their social networks and become isolated, and the ‘child-rearing anxiety’ such as being seized with the vague anxiety about child rearing and sometimes maltreating a child, has become a social problem” [Ibid: 3]. On the basis of this point, the next section briefly outlines the development of Japanese childcare support policies in relation to the rising problem of child rearing by “full-time mothers.”⁴

2 15-16% of male employees in their 30s and 40s were working more than 60 hours a week in 2015 [Cabinet Office 2016: 8]. According to Matsuda [2008], the main factor that kept Japanese fathers away from participation in child rearing is long working hours.

3 In fact, more than half of mothers in dual-parent families with preschool children are not working (Japan’s national census 2010).

4 With regard to the role of mothers and their strong commitment to maternal identity, these are the women who choose the lifestyle of becoming a housewife only during child birth and child rearing, rather than taking on the role of wives [Miyasaka 1988, 2013].

2. Problems on child rearing and development of childcare support policies

In post-war Japan, the use of public day-care services had been restricted by the employment and economic status or disease conditions of parents since the 1950s, and its target was limited to children “lacking day-care (at home)” [Shimoebisu 1994: 254-5]. Since the 1960s, the Japanese government has emphasized the significance of childcare at home and the caring role of women in relation to economic growth and the sound development of children. Parallel to the policy trends which put the importance on the mother’s responsibility for children, the male breadwinner family or “modern family” [Ochiai 1989] had expanded and this led to “housewifization” [Ochiai et al. 2007: 3] of women in the early 1970s, i.e., the popularization of full-time mothers.

However, it was also in the 1970s that “child-rearing anxiety” or “maternity neurosis” became the focus of family problems. From the 1980s onwards, studies on the cause of childcare problems are fully established and their perspectives developed from the focus on individual mothers to their social relations or the social institution of child rearing [Yamane 2000 → 2006: 53]. Katsuko Makino was one of the first researchers to study the problem of “child-rearing anxiety” among Japanese mothers. She defined child-rearing anxiety, created original scales for its analysis, and found that mothers at home tended to feel monotony in daily life and isolation due to child rearing [Makino 1989]. Moreover, it was clarified that the degree of child-rearing anxiety associated with the wideness of the social networks of mothers and the relationship with their husbands [Makino 2005].

Although “child-rearing anxiety” and “isolated child rearing” had been recognized as problems among full-time mothers, the support for these parents was not established immediately. The national policy on childcare maintained its emphasis on the importance of motherhood and childcare at home as well as the self-help efforts of families with regard to child rearing [Inoue 2013: 79]. However, in the beginning of the 1990s, the decline in birthrate increased the sense of social crisis, and since then, the idea and the measures of social support for child rearing have been gradually developed. In 1998, the government finally denied the “myth of the first three years” in a white paper, and mentioned the problem of full-time mothers’ tendency for high anxiety in child rearing, as well as the burdens of child rearing caused by the social isolation of parents due to the lack of support from relatives and neighbors. Against the background of not only the declining birthrate but also the increasing problem of child abuse, these problems came into focus, and full-time mothers became the target of childcare support [Inoue 2013: 83-91].

Moreover, from the year 2000, the phrase “support for the development of the next generation” became widely used, and the idea of childcare support for “all children and families” was clearly declared in policy documents. In 2005, the Japanese government mentioned the importance of the “socialization of childcare” in a white paper with regards to the limitations of care by family and the necessity to raise children as the responsibility of families as well as society as a whole. So, far, under these circumstances, childcare support measures not only for working parents, but also for children and parents at home have been gradually developed. And these have proceeded to include the community and voluntary sectors as actors of childcare support for the family in the community.

3. Childcare salons as a support for parents with infants in the community

The Community-based Child-rearing Support Centers (CCSCs) constitute a typical childcare support measure for parents especially who look after their young children at home. CCSCs are open spaces where children and parents can gather freely, communicate with each other, and share their anxieties and worries related to child rearing. The prototype of CCSCs, which was later named as the Regional Childcare Support Centers, was introduced in some nursery centers in the early 1990s aiming to respond to the consultations of families in the community. Moreover, in 2002, the “Tsudoi-no-Hiroba”⁵ program was established. They were set up in public facilities, community centers, vacant stores, private houses, and apartments etc., to provide places for parents to gather with infants and promote their interactions on child rearing by facilitating the use of volunteers in the community. Later, the role of municipalities in the child-rearing support program was legally stipulated, and local residents and organizations as well as non-profit organizations (NPOs) were clearly defined as the pillars of Japanese childcare support policies [Hashimoto 2015: 12-3].

In 2007, the Regional Childcare Support Centers and Tsudoi-no-Hiroba program were categorized into three types of the CCSCs: the “center type,” which is mostly set up in public facilities or licensed day-care centers, the “Hiroba type,” which is originally run by NPOs and voluntary groups in a community, and the “children’s hall type,” which utilized unoccupied children’s halls for school children. Furthermore, the legal position of child-rearing support and CCSCs was clarified by the 2008 revision of the Child Welfare Act and the Social Welfare Act, and fixed in Japanese child and family welfare policy [Ibid: 14-6]. Although CCSCs were reorganized and their categorization changed in 2013 and 2014, the fundamental services offered by CCSCs are as follows: (1) to provide spaces for children and parents and promote exchanges, (2) to implement consultation and assistance for child rearing, (3) to offer information related to childcare in local communities, and (4) to provide classes in child rearing and childcare support.

Basically, CCSCs are publicly subsidized and open for more than 3 days in a week. Its number increased continuously and amounted to 6,818 in 2015 [MHLW 2015b]. However, although the exact statistics are not officially published, there are a large number of places and programs that are similar to the CCSCs. They are usually open for less than 3 days a week, and are partially or not subsidized by the local government. Users tend to call CCSCs and other programs all put together, and similarly recognize them as places for children and parents in the community. Therefore, as commonly called, this paper calls all of these “childcare salons.”

4. Questions and analytical framework

There are many studies on support services of childcare salons. They institutionally provide opportunities for social interaction between urban mothers, who are physically isolated and are bearing the burdens of child rearing all alone and are restrained by their maternal identity [Hori 2013]. Moreover, according to Okamoto [2015], CCSCs are effective for reducing child-rearing anxiety in mothers: a significant improvement was observed especially regarding factors such as lack of information about child rearing, friends and help. So far, investigations have demonstrated the support provided by childcare

5 “Tsudoi” means gathering and “Hiroba” means plaza or place in Japanese.

salons to their user families and the effects of these salons on users in meeting other families in the community and building some sort of relationship with them. However, few studies analyze the interrelations of the support provided at childcare salons and the social networks that are formed there from the perspective of comparing different management types of childcare salons. Therefore, this paper considers how these varieties of childcare salons, which are run by different social actors, support child rearing of mothers with young children, and how the difference affects the childcare support networks that are formed there.

In order to look into these questions, I maintain the analytical framework of the childcare support system presented by Sekii et al. [1990]. In this framework, childcare support was divided into two types: formal support such as the institutions or policy measures for supporting child rearing (e.g., day-care centers, childcare salons, etc.), and informal support provided by the childcare support networks of individual parents (e.g., relatives, neighbors, fellow mothers, etc.). Based on this, I focus on two types of childcare support: institutional support provided by childcare salons (e.g., providing spaces, facilities, programs, information, consultation, and care services), and relational support, which is mutually provided for mothers who use childcare salons (e.g., the exchange of information, consultation, and care labor between those user mothers). I focus on the 4 types of childcare salons that are categorized by different management bodies, namely, the center type, children's hall type, Hiroba type and local-based type, and analyze how these variations in management body bring about the differences between institutional support and relational support that are observed in each type of salons.

5. Investigation and results

From 2012 to 2013, I conducted a qualitative investigation in the Japanese urban area of Sapporo,⁶ where most infants are cared for by full-time mothers at home.⁷ I conducted semi-structured interviews⁸ at 8 childcare salons across the 4 types in Sapporo with 67 mothers who had preschool children and were users of these salons. Forty-three mothers who participated in the interviews had one child and 22 had two children, aged 0-2 years. Fifty mothers were full-time housewives, 10 were on their parental leave, and only 2 mothers were working at that time. Sixty-one of the 67 mothers live in nuclear families. Based on my previous paper about this investigation [Kudo 2013a, 2013b], I will shortly explain the results of my analysis and summarize the institutional support and relational support of the above-mentioned 4 different types of childcare salons.

First, the center type is open during the day on all the days of the week. These centers are run by local municipalities and located besides public day-care centers so that they can employ special staff members, such as nursery teachers, public health nurses, and dieticians. This type of salon provides well-equipped playing spaces for families, and its professional staff members offer information and consultation about child rearing. Moreover, the center type is recognized as a convenient space for going out with

6 Japan's 4th biggest city, with a 1.94 million population (2016). Its total fertility rate is Japan's cities' lowest levels of 1.16 (2016). Moreover, among the families with preschool children, 93.2% are nuclear families (2015).

7 Only 12% of 0 year old and 28.5 % of 1-2 years old children are using day-care services [City of Sapporo 2015], and almost 60% of 20-49 years old women who are taking care of children are not working [MIC 2012].

8 Each interview spanned 15-30 minutes.

children and used as a place for developing existing networks.⁹ In the center type, mutual care exchange among users is not common because users tend to stay and play in individual family units. For example, they talk to other users while their children interact with each other, but in general, making friends is not the main purpose of their visit. Therefore, the formation of networks between mothers is difficult in this type.

The children's hall type utilizes the unoccupied time of the children's hall for schoolchildren, which means that they are open 1 to several days a week in the morning. In this type, staff members offer special playing programs for families. As these children's halls are located in all school areas, in contrast to the center type, this type is used as a space for exchanging and forming friendships both among children and mothers in the neighborhood. In the children's hall, mothers actively talk about child rearing, and in some cases, they help each other with childcare and housework. In general, meeting the mothers who got to know each other there is their incentive to visit the same salon every week. So, it is easier for them to build long-term relationships here. However, some groups of mothers are partly excluded, and this may discourage the use of these children's halls for newcomers.

Some salons are run by local NPOs and others. Here, I call them Hiroba Type. They are usually open for more than 3 days in a week at such as private houses in the community. These salons are used as a playing space for children on a daily basis. Mostly, the staff members are mothers from the community, so they counsel the mother users about child rearing based on their own experiences, and they also promote exchanges and mutual support among users. Therefore, users in these salons tend to talk to not only their close friends but also other visitors, and this opens up the relationship between users. Moreover, frequent users mutually look after the children and share their troubles regarding child rearing. However, since these salons are located in private houses, compared to the other salon types in public facilities, it is not easy for people who have not used them before to access.

Finally, there are childcare salons categorized here as the local-based type. Most of them are not included in publicly subsidized CCSCs as they are open only once or a few times in a month but run by voluntary groups or local organizations. In Sapporo, more than half of childcare salons are of this type, which is set up in vacant spaces, such as elementary schools and community centers. In these salons, elderly volunteer staff members entertain and play with the children; therefore, it functions as a playing space with special activities and performances provided by volunteers for families. Moreover, these elderly staff members actively approach the mother users and join the exchanges between them. Some users meet and talk to each other for the first time, but these salons are held only a few times in a month and the users are busy participating in the playing programs during their visit; so, conversations tend to be quite casual. Therefore, it is necessary for users to also use other opportunities to get to know each other.

In relation to the variations in management body, the 4 types of childcare salon are diverse in terms of staff members and volunteers, space or facilities, and their opening hours. Moreover, they are characterized by the features of support and network formation. The center type and children's hall type provide professional and special institutional support; the former type of salons function as well-equipped playing rooms and specialize in professional staff support, and the latter type can be recognized as a public space for families in the neighborhood that offers special playing programs. In contrast, the Hiroba type

⁹ For example, I met some interviewees who visited these center type salons with their fellow mothers, who had gotten to know each other not at these salons but in the maternity hospital or in the SNS community.

and the local-based type provide practical or experiential institutional support; the former type is used by families from the community on a daily basis and its staff members offer childcare support based on their own experiences, and the latter offers inter-generational exchanges with elderly volunteers and a variety of special events.

Relational support and network formation among mother users are commonly observed in the children's hall type and Hiroba type, but not in the center type and local-based type salons. The center type salons are open for long hours every day, so it is difficult for users to meet the same people, but the local-based type salons are held only a few times for a short time and are therefore not suitable for building stable relationships. In contrast, the children's hall type and Hiroba type are open around 3 days a week and constantly used by families from the neighborhood. Therefore, it is much easier for users to meet and talk to the same members, and a variety of childcare support is exchanged between them.

6. Summary and conclusion

The development of childcare salons implies a transition in the Japanese family policies, which has gradually widened the target of childcare support policies to include children and parents at home, as well as extended the voluntary and community sectors to include its support actors. Although the degree of observed and social relations vary with the type of salon, these salons provide users with opportunities to not only get useful information and advice about child-rearing but also interact with other users, professional as well as voluntary childcare supporters. These salons increase the involvement of non-family members in child rearing and embody the idea of "socialization of childcare" that "child rearing cannot be carried out by the family members alone; therefore, people in society should support them."

Among the 4 types of childcare salons, children's hall type has its distinctive feature of active social intercourse and formation of mother user groups. However, there were some mothers who face difficulties or uneasiness regarding the relationships at these salons or those who prefer bland relationships such as those in the center type. Therefore, it is necessary to provide various options for the use of childcare salons as well as to create an easy-to-visit atmosphere for the unfamiliar users. Moreover, with the exception of the Hiroba type salons in this study, the parents are expected to monitor and take responsibility for their own child's behavior at these salons. This implies that the use of childcare salons may strengthen parents' awareness of the responsibilities of child rearing, and in some cases, may increase pressures or anxieties about the use of childcare salons.¹⁰ In addition, these childcare salons are mainly used by mothers and considerably depend on female care workers and volunteers. Some father users can also be observed at the center type, which is open on the weekends as well. Some male staff members and elderly volunteers can also be observed in the other types of salons, but they remain in the minority. So far, these salons have limited means to change the sexual division of care labor within the family as well as that of care support labor outside the family.

In order to fully evaluate the impact of childcare salons on child rearing for Japanese families, it is necessary to include parents and children who do not use these salons into the analysis and to specifically analyze the variations in childcare salons nationwide. Moreover, it should be carefully considered how

¹⁰ In fact, I met some mothers who were nervous about their children causing trouble by crying loudly or hurting other children at childcare salons.

these childcare support measures can change the relations between and norms of child rearing in Japan from the perspectives of gender and the family's responsibilities toward care.

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Note

This study is based on the analysis reported by Kudo [2013b].

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