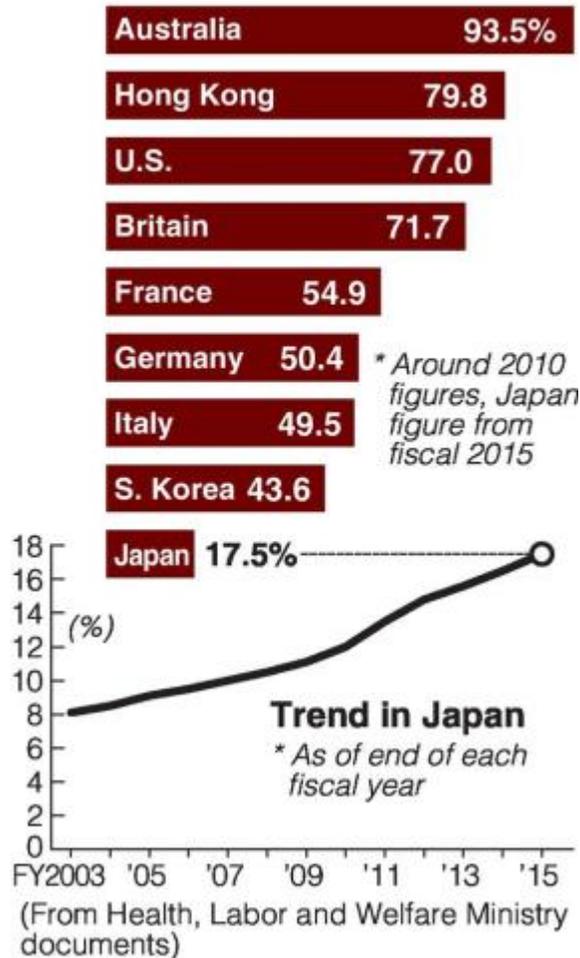


Behind the Scenes / How can a foster parent system take root?

Percentage of children who need care that are placed with foster parents



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An expert panel of the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry has announced a new goal concerning pre-elementary school children who cannot live with their parents due to circumstances including abuse: Within seven years, over 75 percent of them should enter the care of foster parents (see below). The idea is to create the kind of “from facility to home” process that is becoming more common overseas. Accomplishing this goal, however, will require urgent efforts to cultivate foster parents and strengthen their support system.

A beloved ‘Mama’

“Mama, can I have some more?” a child asked. “Me, too!” shouted another. Dinner is always a lively affair at the home of a homemaker in Inzai, Chiba Prefecture. That is because on top of her four biological children — aged from junior high school to university age — she has five foster children aged from under 1 to 8.

The foster children each have different surnames, and leave for kindergarten or school from the 50-year-old woman’s house. They lead the same day-to-day lives as their foster mother’s biological children — she leaves them with other mothers in the neighborhood who are friends, and even lets them stay over at their friends’ houses. They also went on a family trip to Hokkaido over summer vacation this year.

She explains to the foster children that they are not biologically related by telling them, “Your real papa and mama love you very much, but they can’t take care of you.” Some of the children

meet their biological parents on a regular basis, with child consultation centers acting as intermediaries.

The woman became a foster parent when her eldest daughter, now 20 years old, was in elementary school. When the girl became concerned about a classmate who had been abused, her mother contacted a prefectural office to ask for help and found out about the foster care system. Since then, she has raised 13 children, most of them infants. Out of the 13, eight have returned to their biological parents.

While there are hardships involved, such as newborn babies whose cries keep her up at night, she says it is rewarding to watch the children grow.

One of the foster children, a girl now in her first year of elementary school, was removed from her parents' care and placed under the protection of public authorities immediately after birth. The girl then came to live with the homemaker when she was 1 year and 10 months old.

In the beginning, she refused to let people come near her, did not want to sleep beside others and cried terribly when someone tried to take a bath with her.

Today, she is attached to her foster mother and calls her "Mama."

Another of the foster children, a 3-year-old boy, was found by a facility to have delayed language development, but has now begun talking more.

The woman has a wish: "I want to see the number of foster parents increase so that younger children, in particular, can grow up in a family."

Cultivating a child's personality

The goal that the welfare ministry's panel put forward in its report was to, as a general rule, have children who have yet to enter elementary school — who have been removed from their parents' care mainly because of abuse — cared for in foster families rather than in institutions. This is a concrete expression of the "principle of home care" that is specified in the Revised Child Welfare Law enacted last year.

The panel aims to increase foster family placement rates to more than 75 percent. It wants to hit this goal within five years for children under 3 and within seven years for children over 3 who have not yet entered school. The panel hopes to progressively scale down institutions where children are raised in groups, and bring increased expertise to the institutions such as to care for disabled children and support foster parents.

After all, building a stable relationship with a specific caregiver from infancy onward gives children a foundation to cultivate their personality and social skills. Research from outside Japan indicates that children who live in institutions with a frequent rotation of caregivers have difficulty building stable relationships. It has been pointed out that, later in life, some of these children experience problems with interpersonal relationships and behavior.

In many countries, the foster care system has been expanding since the 1960s. Foster care is now the standard way to house those children in countries such as the United States, where 80 percent of the children live with foster families, and in Britain, where the percentage is 70 percent. Japan, on the other hand, has been slow to adapt. More than 80 percent of those children in Japan still live in group facilities even today, and the percentage placed in foster families was as low as 17.5 percent as of the end of fiscal 2015.

NPO support

The challenge is to recruit and support foster parents. About 10,000 families are registered as foster parents nationwide, but only 3,817 were actually fostering children as of the end of fiscal 2015.

One of the reasons given for this is that in many cases, a child's biological parents do not give consent for their child to be placed in a foster family. Even when the biological parents do consent, the child's upbringing and personality can make it difficult to find compatible foster parents. The problem of children who end up bouncing from one foster family to another because they cannot get along with their foster parents is acute in other countries.

It is hoped that support efforts by nonprofit organizations and others will make a difference. In the city of Shizuoka, the percentage of children in alternative care who were placed in foster families was 46.9 percent at the end of fiscal 2015 — higher than any other municipality in Japan. This success is the result of constant efforts by a city-based NPO that provides all kinds of support — from the interviews necessary to become a foster parent to consultations.

In the city, training sessions for foster parents who are currently fostering children are held more than 20 times a year. Eleven experienced foster parents serve as consultants and make regular visits to foster families. Hideki Mochizuki, director general of the NPO, says that “[the NPO] and foster parents work as a team so that we can deal with any concerns the caregivers have, for example when a psychologically damaged child exhibits problem behavior.”

However, although the NPO organizes about 40 meetings a year that include presentations of foster parents' experiences, understanding of the foster care system remains limited. By fiscal 2020, the government will establish a system that provides support for everything from recruitment to consultations after a child is placed.

Doubling special adoptions

The panel's report also stipulated a policy of advancing the special adoption system at an early stage when biological parents are found to be unable to provide for their child for an extended period of time.

Currently, about 500 adoptions are conducted under the system each year, but the panel aims to double this number in five years.

The special adoption system was established in 1987 from the standpoint of child welfare and was incorporated into the Civil Code. Foster parents have custody of children on a temporary basis, and there is no legal parent-child relationship between the adults and the children. In contrast, a legal lifelong parent-child relationship can be established under the special adoption system.

In principle, special adoptions are available for adoptive children under the age of 6, while adoptive parents both need to be at least 25. After obtaining the consent of the biological parents, the adoptive parents apply for adoption at the family courts.

After the process is complete, children will be recorded on the family register, recognized as the parents' "oldest son," "oldest daughter," and the like. An adoption cannot be annulled, in principle.

There are differences between the regular adoption system. The special adoption system has age limits, and the children's legal relationships with their biological parents will be terminated, meaning the children will lose their right of inheritance, and will be relieved of the duty to support their biological parents.

The government plans to work toward having more applicants to become adoptive parents for the special adoption system, and raise the age limit of children eligible to be adopted.

Local support crucial for success

"The revised Welfare Law states that children should be raised in households, and we converted this principle into a numerical target of 75 percent or more" of children being fostered, said Takeshi Fujibayashi, an expert panel member who heads the Fukuoka city government's Children's Advisory Center.

"I believe this figure is achievable by actively recruiting foster parents and utilizing private institutions. Increasing the percentage [of children fostered] is not enough, though — it is also

important to reinforce the municipalities' support system that helps children return to their biological parents and have more special adoptions when such cases are difficult," he added.

Reiho Kashiwame, a Shukutoku University professor who specializes in child and family welfare, said, "To ensure the latest goal [of 75 percent] does not end up as an empty promise, it is important that institutions and local communities join hands and share a sense of participation in raising children, in addition to making concrete measures and securing financial resources."

■ Foster parents

A system in which adults have custody of and raise children who cannot live with their biological parents for reasons such as abuse and poverty. After undergoing interviews, visits to homes and training sessions at child consultation centers and other relevant institutions, the foster parents will be registered with local governments. There are several types of foster parents: foster parents who raise up to four children aged under 18, in principle; "specialized" foster parents who raise children who need special care due to reasons such as abuse; foster parents who adopt the children; and relatives of children becoming foster parents. Allowances are paid — ¥86,000 per month for the first adoptive child (the amount set for fiscal 2017) — in addition to living and medical expenses. There are also "family homes," where people with experience of being foster parents and other staff raise five to six children.

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