

ALL GENRES

Foster family and adoption system needs greater support to expand

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A warm, caring environment for raising children who cannot live with their biological parents for reasons such as abuse or poverty will be secured. A system designed to increase the use of foster parents and adoption needs to quickly be put in place.

The Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry has decided on new numerical targets for places that accept children who cannot be raised by their parents.

The ministry will, in principle, prohibit placing preschool-age children in welfare facilities, and will raise the percentage of these children placed in foster homes to 75 percent within five to seven years. It also will raise this percentage for school-age children to 50 percent within 10 years.

At present, only 17.5 percent of children who need such care are placed in foster homes. The government had initially set a goal of raising this figure to more than 30 percent by fiscal 2029. The latest ministry targets go well above this, and have brought the target date forward.

In Japan, 45,000 children need protection because their parents cannot raise them. The majority of these children live together at facilities such as orphanages and infant homes.

The revised Child Welfare Law passed in May 2016 clearly stated that, in principle, children are to be raised in a home environment, such as with foster parents. The government's latest targets are an indication of its strong resolve to give concrete shape to achieving that objective.

Building an emotional connection with particular adults is extremely important for a child's healthy development. At care facilities, the staffers often come and go. The government's aim of encouraging the moving of children to family homes is reasonable.

Expert staff required

The government also has drawn up a plan to double the number of "special adoption" cases — in which a child is legally considered the biological child of its adoptive parents on the koseki family register — within five years, which would bring this figure to more than 1,000 cases per year. This would be an effective option for ensuring children permanently have a stable home.

The adoption agency law, which is designed to improve the quality of private adoption agencies, was passed in December 2016. This law should function as one part of the measures to help child welfare.

The problem lies in whether the government can construct a system that corresponds to its targets.

Across Japan, only 10,000 households are registered as families willing to become foster parents. Some people on the front lines of this issue have expressed bewilderment over the government's dramatically

increased targets. It will not benefit the children if steps such as checks of the suitability of households offering to accept them are neglected in the rush to achieve these targets.

It will be essential to ensure there are sufficient staffers at child consultation centers, which have a core role to play in this issue. Matching a child with a foster or adoptive family is riddled with difficult problems. Nurturing and securing specialist human resources for this task also needs to be addressed.

Strengthening consultation and support services will be essential for increasing the number of households willing to take in children. Not a few children are difficult to raise, as they may have mental and physical development problems due to abuse or other reasons. The nation needs a system that is consistently implemented, from advertising for and training foster parents to providing support after a child has been placed in their home.

Child consultation centers are also being stretched as they respond to the surge in reported cases of child abuse. It is vital that these centers work closely with orphanages, infant homes, private operators and others to support foster families and households that have adopted children.

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