

Child Care in Japan

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1 Let me state in this column what I have experienced and studied about babies. The way baby is raised determines its whole life. This is what written in the World Children's White paper 2001 published by UNICEF.

As for my personal experience, I was born in 1939(77 years old now) and was a kindergartener when World War II was over. I was exhausted with tuberculosis and poverty, and I had been living in JIAIEN Children's Home (which used to be an orphanage), with my parents and with other children who lost their parents or caretakers. I thought children without their parents were pitiful, and had kept that thought and feeling for a long time. Because of that, I studied in a college about how to become happy, but couldn't find the right answer.

2 After I graduated from college, I worked for an institution for children. When I was 30 years old. I had a chance to study in the US as an exchange student, so I went to the USA, studied at an emotionally disabled child facility, and studied in a university for one year with scholarship. In the American facility for children there were 30 boys and girls of junior and high school ages. Under the judgment by the Family Court not to go back home nor school, they were ordered to improve their bad behaviors and problems within two years in the facility. There was a school for the residents in the facility. The children in my eyes were all nice and good, but they had problems with interpersonal relations and were angry, irritated, got annoyed, and easily excited. With much violence and verbal abuse, they had troubles every day and everywhere. There were no signs of improvement nor ending the troubles. No one knew why it was happening.

3 I recognized the reality that even if a child lived with his parents, he could cause problems. I returned to Japan one year later, and a question never left in my mind: "Why a children becomes unhappy or gets into trouble, even though he is with his parent/s?" I returned to Kumamoto and began a 20-year teaching career at a college. Gradually, I have solved my question through the experiences of 30-years work at children institutions.

Soon after I returned to Japan from America, I visited my college alma mater, saw the

president, and explained why there were so many problem-children in the US. The president, who had the same kind of experience of studying abroad, told me about some interesting research. The researcher found that there were some children living in the US who had nothing to do with delinquency. There were the Japanese-Americans. The researcher compared the group of Japanese-American children and other groups. The Japanese American parents hold and pamper their babies, and start to discipline strictly when the baby reaches around two years of age. They keep raising them strictly until high school age. On the other hand, the western parents raise their baby strictly at first, and then gradually loosen up or spoil them, and there was much delinquency.

4 Japan changed. The Japanese children are gentle, calm and patient, or so I had believed for a long time. But children has been changed to be more like that of America. Children become angry suddenly and easily. There is school violence, bullying, refusal to attend school, child abuse, social withdrawal, etc. Problems are getting more different and more complex. Why does it happen?

Emotions are involved in those behaviors. Advance in brain research has revealed that emotional fluctuation causes those problematic behaviors. A baby has 400g of brain at birth. It becomes 800g at 1 year, twice as big. A baby cannot speak or walk yet, but his brain develops. It has nothing to do with intelligence. The brain works for safety and security.

Many animals have life support functions in the brain. First of all, the outside world information is gathered in the hippocampus that controls memory, and the amygdala determines whether it is safe or dangerous. If it is safe, it is unnecessary to be upset, but if dangerous and ill at ease, it must be decided instantly whether to flee or attack. Otherwise you must lose your life (must be killed). The amygdala promotes excitement in the brain.

The human being knows another way: to endure and to be patient. Patience is controlled by the orbital frontal cortex in the brain, and the function should be trained by 3years. After that age, the development of this part of the brain stops, it is said.

5 Mr. Kyoji Watanabe, a writer in Kumamoto, introduced some statements in his book "Leftover Facade" about the Japanese way of child raising, which were written by foreigners living in Japan at the end of Edo era and the beginning of Meiji era. In those periods, Japanese children and their parents were poor, but Lafcadio Hearn and other western residents said that "Japan is a heaven for children". Children could be seen

holding their mother's breast, riding piggyback, holding hands, hugging, and smiling without neither fear nor anxiety. There was nowhere like Japan, they said. It seemed that the child at that time was quite free from anxiety, was confident, and had a sense of relief in the brain.

6 Nowadays a mother giving a piggyback ride, carrying a baby in her arms, sleeping beside a baby, and breast-feeding is not easily found. Why not? It was because a maternity health-record book has been handed out to all the expectant mothers since 1965. In this book is the guidance; "Do not give piggyback rides or carry your baby in your arms all the time. That causes your baby trouble always asking to be carried on your back or in your arms. Make piggyback time short." I sent a letter to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, which published the record book, in order to protest the content and asked for it to be revised in 1983. Then, in 1985 the record book was revised and leads to today.

There is a new evidence found that a mother secretes a hormone of Oxytocin which makes her more gentle when she is feeding her baby breast milk. The same hormone is secreted when volunteering or touching or stroking others. After this fact became known, the western mothers started to feed their babies breast milk. Unfortunately, the rate of breast-feeding in Japan is less than 50%.

7 The Japanese traditional way of child care, "a piggyback, carrying a baby in one's arms, sleeping beside a baby, breast-feeding" cause relief and feeding free from fear in a baby's brain. On this bases, loving exchange is started between a mother loving her baby and a baby loving one's mother. It is called "attachment". I am concerned that the attachment between mothers and children is getting weak and is in decline there days. An American psychologist, Dr. H.F. Harlow, found when researching monkeys that with sufficient attachment between mother and offspring, the monkey can have fun playing with "friends". The next step is that there can be affection between members of the opposite sex.

When a child reaches age three, the brains weighs 960g. This is 160 grams more than at age one. What has happened in the brain during this period? Doctor Kokumai claims that the child gains the ability to be patient. Controlling this ability of patience takes place in the orbital frontal cortex. Whether the child gains control of this ability to be patient depends on how the child is raised.

8 Even though much of the details of brain functions are unknown, the above is

understood. In my opinion, problems post puberty are a result of lack of security and feeling of safety during the first few years of the individual's life. In addition, it can be inferred that if there is fear of strangers, attachment between child and mother has been formed. The phenomenon of fear of strangers is a sign that the child's brain distinguishes that mother is safe, unknown individuals are not safe. The child can cling to its mother, but stay away from the unsafe stranger. This reveals the child's will. This phenomenon reveals that attachment has been formed.

It can be inferred that when the child does not know the safety of the mother, it searches for the safety of other individuals. If this is the case, the child may suffer problems during puberty. The infant looks to the mother's eyes to judge whether the situation is safe or not. The eyes tell more than words.

The Japanese saying that "no matter the passage of years, the personality of age three remains unchanged" seems true. The way of child raising of the Japanese Americans seems reasonable.

The end.