

# Raising Children in Japan

By *Eric MARCKS*

## 1. We Decide to Move to Japan

MY wife and I decided to move to Tokyo last year. We did not take this decision lightly. My wife had spent close to a dozen years away from her native Japan doing graduate work and teaching in the United States. It had been more than 10 years since I had last lived in Japan. We both missed Japan and were looking forward to returning, but we had grown very fond of our adopted home, Berkeley, California. We also wondered how the move would affect our 18-month-old son and our soon-to-be-born second son.

Before our move, we had heard of the declining birthrate phenomenon (*shoushika*) in Japan, but it was not until we experienced what it is like to raise children in Tokyo that we came to appreciate some of the causes of this phenomenon and the challenges facing Japan in reversing this trend.

## 2. Childbirth

Once we decided to move, we began tackling one of two immediate concerns: finding a hospital for my wife, who was scheduled to give birth four months after our move. My wife learned that few hospitals in the Tokyo area accept women in mid-pregnancy, and even fewer administer epidurals. (The Japanese medical establishment still clings to the notion that women have to suffer during childbirth, a notion that my wife does not accept.) We found only one hospital in central Tokyo that fit those criteria, though the hospital discouraged epidurals and limited their administration to the work hours of the hospital's sole anesthesiologist, roughly between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.

The greatest difference between the childbirth experience in the United States and Japan was my role. In the United States – or at least in Berkeley – the father faces intense pressure to participate in the childbirth. Not so in

Japan. I had to pay 10,000 yen for the privilege of attending (but not participating in) my son's birth, as the nurses did their best to keep me at a distance from my wife lest I interfere. (A nurse explained to my wife that husbands are worse than useless during labor because they just get in the way.) Fortunately, the birth went well – likely on account of my by-stander status and the very competent and considerate medical staff – but I was struck by the limited expectations placed on fathers.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of childbirth in Japan, however, is the fact that Japanese national health insurance does not cover prenatal medical visits or childbirth expenses, based on the rationale that pregnancy and childbirth are not abnormal conditions, and therefore, do not merit insurance coverage. This is an odd position to take in a country with a very low birthrate. National health insurance does, however, offer a lump-sum payment to new mothers to cover a portion of childbirth expenses, and I understand that the Diet is considering extending coverage to prenatal medical visits.

## 3. Daycare

Our other immediate concern was securing a spot for our son in daycare, as both my wife and I work. My wife looked for openings in daycares in the wards of Tokyo in which we wanted to live, and found that all had long waiting lists. We eliminated the wards with the longest waiting lists from consideration. The ward with the shortest waiting list is Chiyoda Ward, home to the Imperial Palace, the Diet, numerous government offices, and many of Japan's largest companies, but relatively few residents. As luck would have it, we learned that a daycare would open in Chiyoda Ward just two days after our move to Japan. My wife dispatched her parents to attend the open house (strongly recommended for daycare applicants) and submit an

application. We received an acceptance letter shortly before moving to Japan.

Because the daycare was just minutes from my office, I took our son to and from daycare. The commute was not a problem during our first month in Japan because we lived in temporary housing near a relatively uncrowded subway line. I learned a lot about train station elevators in little time: which stations have them (as a general rule, JR stations don't and subway stations do), where in the stations they are located, and which cars stop closest to them. The sight of a besuited man taking his child to school by subway during the rush hour is unusual in Tokyo, so we received a lot of stares – for the most part exuding puzzlement, but on many occasions, encouragement.

A month later, we moved wards to an apartment right across the street from a daycare. Unfortunately, our application to this, and every other public daycare and approved private daycare in the ward, was rejected. We were number 116 on the waiting list. The list is much longer in other wards; a friend in a neighboring ward was number 600.

The competition for entry into daycares in Tokyo is fiercest among 1-year-olds (the category into which our older son fell) because many new mothers want to spend a year with their newborns before placing them in daycare and resuming work. It is usually easier to find a spot for a 0-year-old – if the newborn has a favorable birthday.

Daycares in Japan operate from April to March. The application deadline for admission in April is generally mid-January. This means that to qualify for a 0-year-old slot in April, the baby must be born before mid-January. Our second son was born in mid-February, so he had to apply for openings in May. All the slots fill up in April and openings after April are rare, however,



so babies born after the application deadline for April will not find a slot in the 0-year-old category. Their next opportunity to apply on an equal footing with other babies of their age is as 1-year-olds, but as mentioned above, this age group is the most competitive. It is for this reason that many women in Tokyo who do not want to give up their careers try to time their pregnancies to accommodate the daycare application schedule. The optimal birth date is April or May; it allows the mother to spend nearly one year with her baby and then apply for the less-competitive 0-year-old category the following January. With a 0-year-old with an unfavorable birthday and a 1-year-old, we were out of luck.

Further complicating matters, we now lived next to a much more crowded subway line that made it impossible to commute with my

son; I tried it once, and got off the train after just two stops, grateful that the overcrowding had not injured my son. I tried a few other lines, but none offered safe transit to daycare. I finally found a bus that would drop us off within a 15-minute walk from daycare. When the weather improved, I began taking my son to daycare by bicycle, but the absence of parking places for bicycles in central Tokyo made this alternative unreliable.

The story ends well for us, however, because this spring the university where my

wife works opened a daycare that gives preference to women scholars, and both of our children were admitted in the summer. Were it not for this preference, I would still be taking my older son to a daycare far from home in the center of the city and my wife would still be taking care of our 4-month-old and unable to continue with her research and teaching. We are grateful for the opportunity to send our children to a daycare with everything we could ask for, including terrific teachers and plenty of trees nearby, but we are mindful of the fact that we got very lucky.

#### 4. Final Thoughts

As a result of these experiences, I have been following the declining birthrate phenomenon in Japan closely, and I understand the decision of more and more families, especially those in big cities, to have fewer (or no) children. The November/December 2007 issue of *Japan Spotlight* had many insightful articles about this phenomenon that explained well the myriad challenges confronting Japanese women who want to work and have children. These articles focused on the critical issues of the work-life balance and the need to change attitudes, especially among men and employers, with respect to domestic duties and work.

I saw little discussion, however, of infrastructure and financial measures, such as increasing the number of daycares, improving access to public transportation, and reducing the financial burden of childbirth. Such measures are difficult to implement during downturns in the economy, since they require public outlays, but on the other hand, it is often easier to spend money than to change attitudes. In addition, the cost to Japan of doing nothing will be tremendous. JS

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