

Japan: A Paradise for Kids in Danger – Make Children Feel Loved to Prevent Bullying –

By Lars Nicolaysen

SOMEONE once described Japan as a paradise for small children – I would like to agree. But it is a paradise in danger. As a father of three, who are all born in Japan and have a Japanese mother, I was and I am still happy that they have the chance to grow up here in Japan. To see the freedom and harmony in which they spent their first years of life before entering kindergarten was truly touching.

■ “Japanese Way”

Since my wife and I are not “education-minded” parents – the kind of “*kyoiku papa*” or “*kyoiku mama*” – who try to push their kids to always better performances and become “elite” kids of “elite” kindergartens so that they can enter “elite” schools, etc., our kids were allowed to continue their peaceful life at their Japanese kindergarten. It is an independent Japanese kindergarten with great intelligent teachers, who do not

Photo: L. Nicolaysen



Boys practice judo while others, including adults, look on.

always tell the kids what to do and how to do as is known at some other “typical” kindergartens here. They treat them with respect and let them have their own ideas and opinions. They also let them find their own ways to solve conflicts, so that the teachers usually only intervene when there is the risk of physical harm. Kids who graduate from this kindergarten are known to be self-aware, mentally and physically balanced.

Or take the judo training sessions for my boy at a little *dojo* somewhere between Yokohama and Kawasaki. Every week I bring him there and watch his training and I am always touched when I see the respect, the happiness combined with dosed discipline not only the kids are treated with, but everybody. No matter if it is the little kids, the young students or the elder adults who exercise all together at the same time, everybody treats each other with respect and kindness without being told to do so, but rather in a normal human and non-confrontational way – something I would call the Japanese way.

■ Bullying: An Old Story

Having said all that, still, this paradise for kids is very much in danger. Not everywhere in this country can you see this kind of attitude of mutual respect and kindness the Japanese are so famous for in the world anymore. What really disturbs me are the persistent and recently increasing reports about “*ijime*” or bullying among schoolchildren – cases where kids are tortured by other kids so much that some even commit suicide as the only way to escape from their hell.

A series of recent cases where young schoolchildren committed suicide made sad headlines here. Ever since the public debate about the problem, the nation asks itself once again what went wrong

Photo: L. Nicolaysen



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with their kids, with the government forming a task force, calling for quick action to deal with *ijime* – as if it were the first time that kids fell victim to *ijime*. By far no. *Ijime* is an old, serious social problem in Japan. In the past, the government had campaigns and called for reducing the cases of *ijime*. And statistics had it that the number of cases actually went down. If that is true, why then do kids still see no other way than to commit suicide? The sad reality is that *ijime* is still a widespread and serious problem at Japanese schools. In light of the recent cases, there are lots of certainly good-minded calls for quick and better countermeasures to protect children, and hotlines are initiated where kids can talk to experts about their fate and seek help. Whether this can help this time to eradicate *ijime* still seems to be questionable.

Photo: Kyodo News

Kids Prone to Stress

The testimony of victims and educational experts who not only conduct research and file statistics but gain first-hand experience by working with kids and talk to their parents indicate that the reasons for *ijime* are much more complex than can be handled with school counselors or security cameras. They touch the very fabric of Japanese society in general. This is not to say that *ijime* only exists in Japan. *Ijime* is also known among kids in my own country, Germany, for example. But that fact is no comfort for victims here.

There is a lot of stress among kids in Japan. In this country, which used to be a society of farmers or a “society of *mura* (villages),” groups always played an important part in society. At school, students are expected to follow the orders of their teachers and, even more importantly, to cause no trouble to others. The highest priority in educating kids seems to be that kids do not cause any “*meiwaku*” (hard feelings) to others – to the extent that their different stages of development are often denied. This is especially true in our modern days. Many mothers, when asked what is important for them in regard to raising their children, say it is for their kids not to cause *meiwaku*.

Accept Kids As They Are

But kids cannot live without being noisy and bothering others. When a kid experiences something negative, it does not think first about whether it is appropriate to cry. But nowadays kids are expected to behave. For young Japanese mothers, it seems to be very important that when their kids play with others, they behave and talk in a way so that they are always liked by other kids. Such mothers are so nervous and try all they can do to only ensure that their kids are not disliked or avoided by other kids. The result is that there are fewer and fewer kids who enjoy the freedom to just be wild and express themselves with their bodies to start to learn the



Adults have the responsibility of making kids feel loved and helping to create a society free from “*ijime*.”

first steps in their social life. Instead, they are faced with the expectations of adult society, including their own parents, to be “good children.” They are not accepted just the way they are. They are instead scolded whenever they do something “not good.” When little children jump around in an apartment their mothers are afraid of neighbors complaining. Other kids are not allowed to play with soap bubbles because the bubbles could fly against the laundry on the neighbor’s balcony. There are even stories of trees covered with nets to prevent noisy kids from climbing them. This is also partly due to the fact that so many people live nowadays in big cities crammed into small apartments as well as the trend to fewer children, with the effect that each needs to be a perfect child.

Make Kids Feel Loved

Another factor is that many Japanese nowadays can afford to send their kids to cram schools in an effort to further improve their school performances. Many children in Japan, including elementary and junior high school stu-

dents, do not have the impression that they are much loved by their parents just the way they are. They always have to try to meet the expectations of their parents. That is one source of the stress the kids are exposed to nowadays, and that starts often even at kindergarten. Is it so surprising that when kids are not satisfied with what they are, they turn their stress against others who are weaker?

One Japanese teacher once told me that if Japan wants to have more children, which it actually needs, then it should allow its fathers to come home earlier to take a bath with their kids and talk to them. And neighbors and men, the teacher said, should find some nice words for mothers, who shoulder the responsibility of child-raising mostly alone. She added that Japan needs to create a society in which mothers can better enjoy the raising and educating of children – a paradise where children are accepted and respected just the way they are. **JS**

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