

## Family and School Life

Japanese families are like our own; they come in all shapes and sizes.

Japanese parents work hard to make a good life for their children and to give them opportunities. Japanese fathers usually have the responsibility of financially supporting the family. The train ride to work can take an hour or more, each way. Japanese men work very long hours and are often expected to socialize with their boss and coworkers after work. During this social time they communicate with one another in ways that aren't possible in an office, strengthening the work team.

Company employees often have little say about the city in which they work. They can be transferred to another city if their company needs them there. If the transfer comes during the school year or while the kids are in high school, the mother and children may not be able to move with the father. It is not unusual for a father to live in another city, with family members traveling back and forth to visit. This may go on for years. Changing jobs is not easy, as most people are hired when they are young and stay with the same company their entire career. Changing jobs may also risk the loss of a retirement pension.

Japanese mothers manage the family money and take care of the children and the home. They may also have a job. They supervise the children's education, a critical task in Japan. If the father is the oldest son, the mother often helps care for his parents and possibly her own, as well. You may see families which include one or more grandparents. The grandparents may live with their adult children, or the grandparents may be the owners of the home and the children and grandchildren live with them. They may all work together in a family business. The opinions of older family members are respected.

The main role of a Japanese teen is to do well in school. You might see students in their school uniforms traveling to school on the trains, or see a group on a school trip during summer break.

Similar to the USA, school is divided into sections. A child may first attend an educational day care or kindergarten, possibly to prepare them for entrance into a private elementary school. They then attend elementary school for six years, similar to our Grades 1 through 6. Junior high school is

Years 7, 8 and 9. After that, school is not required, although almost all students go on to attend high school. Japan has a high school graduation rate of over 90%, but some students do stop after Grade 9 and either stay home, take correspondence courses or go to work.

There are many choices for high school and they all depend on high school entrance exam scores. Because of this, junior high students are under a lot of pressure and stress. They study after school several days a week. They sometimes drop out of Labo or clubs and sports for a few years while they study for the high school entrance exam. This is because, in a way, the direction of their life is determined by their score on that exam. If they score well on the exam they can attend the high school of their choice.

For a student who wants to go to college, attending a very selective elite private high school can help them get into a top university, perhaps one with a renowned medical or law school. Public high schools are cheaper and will also prepare a student for passing the entrance exam for a good college, but unlike our schools which are open to everyone, public high schools will not accept students with low test scores. Students whose high school entrance exam scores are too low to attend their neighborhood 3-year public high school will apply to a more expensive private high school and then go on to attend college. They may also choose to attend a vocational high school to learn skills for one of the many careers which require technical expertise.

Japanese employers give a lot of weight to which college a student attends, so going to the high school that can help a student get into the “right” college can guarantee a much better job in a preferred career.

High test scores are also required for special technical high schools which provide, for example, training in aviation or nursing. These technical schools are often longer (5 years) than the regular 3 year high school, as they include the equivalent of several years of college.

The Japanese school year begins in April and you will be there during summer break. Because you will be in Japan during the middle of the school year, your host brother or sister may have homework to do, may still attend afternoon or weekend “cram school” (called juku) tutoring to prepare for the exams, or may have school-related club or sports activities. During this time, you can do things with the other members of your host family. You can play

games with the younger children, watch television with the grandparents, help your host mother or write in your journal.

If you have a chance to attend school in Japan, bring your journal so you can write during free class time. Schools have dress codes, so before you travel to Japan, ask your host what clothes to bring. Usually, Japanese students wear black shoes which are not sneakers, white woven shirts and blue skirts or blue pants. School clothes are conservative, with no bare shoulders or collarbones. Students are usually not allowed to dye their hair or wear jewelry or makeup at school.