



SPECIAL FEATURE:
REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19

**COVID-19 IN JAPAN, PART 1:
THE IMPACT ON SOCIAL
FOSTER CARE**

**BY NORIFUMI SENGA, KAYOKO
ITO, KEIJI NOGUCHI AND
KANAKO ISHIDA**

COVID-19 in Japan, Part 1: The impact on social foster care

Norifumi Senga, Kayoko Ito, Keiji Noguchi and Kanako Ishida

Abstract

In Japan, the response to COVID-19 was a soft approach with no enforcement, unlike the lockdown with penalties in other countries. The government's response was to temporarily close elementary, junior high, and high schools across the country. That impacted children living with foster families, and in residential care institutions for children (RCIC). This short article reflects on foster care in Japan during COVID-19. The study uses fictional cases of foster parents and RCIC constructed for research purposes. Although the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the challenges of social care in Japan, it also presents an opportunity for social change.

Keywords

COVID-19, social foster care, foster family, residential care institutions for children (RCIC), Japan

Corresponding author

Norifumi Senga, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Doho University, Department of Social Welfare, 7-1 Inabaji-cho, Nakamura-ku, Nagoya, 453-8540 JAPAN,

n-senga@doho.ac.jp

Response to COVID-19 in Japan

On January 20, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a state of emergency for COVID-19, which has spread mainly from China. In Japan, in contrast, a state of emergency was not declared until April 7. Moreover, there was no enforcement of a lockdown with penalties like other countries and no mandatory closures of restaurants and bars. Companies were encouraged to work from home. The government's response to COVID-19 was a soft approach, requesting voluntary closures. However, Japan's collectivist culture discouraged people from taking the risk of going out and being responsible for spreading the infection, fearing social sanctions for acting in disregard of the norm.

One concrete response to COVID-19 was the temporary closure since March 2 of elementary, junior high, and high schools across the country. The school year in Japan finishes at the end of March, and the new school year begins in April. Although the original plan was to resume schooling after the spring vacation in April, the closure was extended because COVID-19 showed no signs of abating, and the state of emergency was declared on April 7. After the state of emergency was lifted on May 25, elementary, junior high, and high schools resumed.

Social care in Japan during the COVID-19 crisis

The spread of COVID-19 had a significant impact on social care, including foster care and residential care institutions for children (RCIC). Not being able to see friends or play outside during quarantine may sound trivial, but it was stressful for children not living with their families. Foster parents and residential workers in RCIC became anxious to prevent infection and forced the children to remain indoors and avoid risky situations. The lack of enforcement in Japan made it difficult to manage children.

To explain social care in Japan during the COVID-19 crisis, the authors of this article constructed fictional cases of foster parents and RCIC by combining various cases they heard of from foster parents and residential workers in RCIC.

Case 1: The situation of a foster family in Japan

The foster parents live with three foster children and three biological children. Since two biological children are university students, they lived in apartments near the university but returned home due to the university's closure. As a result, six children had to share a single house with foster parents temporarily. Houses in Japan are typically very small and could not allow for privacy between the children. The foster parents became very concerned that they might be infected. To prevent infection of the children, they went to the supermarket without them. Naturally, the young children preferred to go also, presenting a challenge to the foster parents to calm them down.

There were positive aspects to living with all the children in one house. The parents were pleased that their children played with their foster children and assisted them with housework. They could experience their children's growth. However, it is also true that relationships between children could be troubled, especially between foster and biological children. Living together in a small house is stressful if children are unable to play outside during these extraordinary times. The children were arguing with each other more often than before. The biological children attended the university's online lectures from home. The school restarted on June 1. It is not easy to adjust to school again after staying at home for such a long time. The foster parents believed it to be essential to side with the children at all times.

Case 2: The situation of residential care in Japan

Since social foster care services in Japan were primarily provided through residential care institutions for children (RCIC), many RCIC use extensive dormitory system facilities, accommodating more than 20 children. The 2011 government report, *The New Future Vision of Social Foster Care*, stated that in principle, priority should be given to family-style foster care. It was recommended that RCIC be converted to foster care of small groups in family-based homes where possible. In line with the report, many RCIC have community-based small-scale child protection institutions (group homes), accommodating six to eight children.

However, this is just one case, but during the COVID-19 crisis, children living in a group home were more mentally unstable than those living in large dormitories. In the dormitory facility, children's mental health conditions were more stable if the dynamics of relationships between children were good. A large playground was one of the positive factors of such a facility as the children were able to relieve stress through exercise. On the other hand, the children in a group home were frustrated by not being able to play with their friends. The children took those conflicts out on the residential workers, which sometimes led to bad relations between the workers and the children.

In Japan, many children in RCIC have regular contact with their biological parents, but personal visits have decreased to prevent COVID-19 infection. Some children had planned to return to their homes in April after the school year finished at the end of March, and when it was possible to join a new class. However, due to the COVID-19 crisis, their returning home was postponed. Visits of social workers to child guidance centres have also been restricted, further reducing interaction with the outside world. Although the children never expressed their loneliness through not seeing the biological parents, or impatience with their treatment not going as planned, they appeared stressed.

It has been a stressful time for residential workers in RCIC. When asking the local government, they were informed it would be a challenge to admit children with mild illnesses to hospital during cluster infections. However, no concrete measures had been decided on in the event of an outbreak. The number of workers is stretched to the limit, and there are concerns the RCIC might collapse if workers are unable to work due to illness or other reasons.

The danger and opportunity in crisis

In the face of crises, many contradictions have become apparent. In this situation, vulnerable children tend to be damaged by the tasks facing society. Children living with foster families or in RCIC, who were separated from their biological parents due to maltreatment, often have already experienced early childhood trauma, deprivations, and social risks. The slightest trigger can push them into critical re-traumatisation.

Child welfare services in Japan attend to more than 46,000 children in social foster care. The majority of these children receive these services at RCIC. Foster parent placement rates are low. During the COVID-19 crisis, support for RCIC was prioritised. While the RCIC received relief supplies, support for foster families was delayed. There was a disparity in support for institutions and foster families. Compared to RCIC, the burden on foster parents and workers in group homes was significant. This does not mean that the RCIC environment was better, but foster families and group homes receive insufficient support in Japan. Children in RCIC are expected to be disciplined and to maintain group order. Even during the quarantine, they lived by the rules of RCIC, and their behavioural problems mostly went unnoticed.

On the other hand, there are no strict rules for foster families. While a free environment is essential for their development, foster parents were often unable to adequately cope with the children's emotional outbursts in such a loose structure, resulting in placement breakdown. The COVID-19 crisis highlighted the problems of social care in Japan, including the weak support system for fostering families.

Children in social care often have difficulty asking for help. However, as everyone began to talk about the stress, anxieties, and concerns during the COVID-19 crisis, some children in social care felt better, realising that they are allowed to express their negative feelings just like everyone else. There may be a positive side to sharing feelings in the crisis. In written Japanese, the word 'crisis' is composed of two Chinese characters: one represents 'danger', and the other represents 'opportunity'. Therefore, the Japanese word for crisis has the contradictory meanings of 'danger' and 'opportunity'. The COVID-19 crisis is both a perilous situation for children in social care and an opportunity for social change. We need to work together to create a better society.

About the authors

Norifumi Senga is Associate Professor, Doho University, Japan. He was awarded a Ph.D. in psychology from Nagoya University in 2016. From 2005 to 2017, he worked as a psychologist at child guidance centres and a children's self-reliance

support facility. And he is the representative of Japanese Association of Integrated Approach for Human Service Professionals.

Kayoko ITO is Professor, Osaka Prefecture University, Japan. She was awarded a Ph.D. in social welfare from Japan College of Social Work in 2007.

Keiji Noguchi is Associate Professor, Fukuyama City University, Japan. He was awarded the Ph.D. in social welfare from Kwansai Gakuin University in 2008.

Kanako Ishida is Associate Professor, Ritsumeikan University, Japan. She was awarded a Master of Social Work degree from Kwansai Gakuin University in 2005.