

Child-Rearing Support, Infant Education in Korea and Children Today

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Every time the rainy season approaches, I vividly remember after my days as a young mother without any experience 15 years ago. Upon getting married, I resigned from the kindergarten where I worked. In those days, after my husband left home for work, I spent the time with my then five-month-old daughter in a room of our new apartment in a rural area, with the rain continuing to fall. If my daughter began to sleep, I began to press her cloth diapers, which were hard to dry due to the weather. I then piled the diapers carefully into a basket.

When I began to raise my daughter, I felt the pleasure of the experience. And at the same time, I also felt a kind of pressure. When a peddler made puffed rice cakes near my apartment building, with loud, explosive sounds, I ran to the peddler to complain about the noise. I feared that the noise may cause my daughter to cry. Although I was almost always somewhat tense in those days, I felt relaxed when I participated in a regular gathering with my friends. We then talked about children and husbands, or sometimes had some small meals together at other's homes. In Korea, the parents of married couples send *kimchi* and other dishes to them even after their marriage. Accordingly, if several friends gather, they can share a wide variety of local dishes at a time.

In Korea, even today, public facilities where mothers rearing children can gather and play with their children are inadequate. Young mothers today do not have sufficient horizontal connections. As a result, they tend to become more isolated than young mothers before.

In Korea, available as a form of support for child-rearing are kindergartens (under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, with a focus on education); nursery schools (under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Health and Welfare, with a focus on childcare), or *orinitibu* (children homes), which are small-scale, family-like childcare facilities established in apartment rooms or other spaces. Since the number of such facilities is large, parents can make an appropriate choice based on their educational philosophy.



Children home

Meanwhile, some kindergartens, such as private ones, strive to distinguish themselves by providing special education for children, such as, ballet classes and English classes by native English speakers. Although this naturally results in an increase in tuition fees, many parents who wish to have their children receive special education select such kindergartens. At some kindergartens, many children are placed on a waiting list.

Due to the amendment of the relevant law this April, the coverage of the childcare subsidy has been expanded from households with low incomes and households in rural areas to all households with preschool children. As a result, childcare for preschool children is now actually provided free of charge. The tuition fee (that is, the basic fee excluding the fee for special classes) is provided directly to kindergartens and nursery schools by the government. It has been three months since the amendment. Especially in urban areas, the number of children wishing to be enrolled at such facilities is larger than the government first expected. As much more money than the original budget is needed now, some cities have begun to share the financial burden with local municipalities, making the future course unclear. Still, it is certain that the amendment has enabled mothers to secure time for themselves, to work or refresh themselves.

While such a measure is benefiting mothers, there is a concern that, partly due to the changing times, less emphasis is being laid on communication between parents and children as well as on education at home.

After becoming a full-time housewife, I entered a university four years ago, and began to work again as an instructor at a kindergarten last year. Now I realize there has been a drastic change in the environment surrounding children and parents. The situation is quite different from that of 15 years ago.

I worked for a kindergarten located in Mokpo City in South Jeolla Province on the southwestern tip of the Korean peninsula. Children are growing up in an environment of rapidly evolving digitization. At home, they do not read picture books, but dance and sing while looking at videos for children on smart phones. Parents shoot movies of their children's growth, exchange the movies with their friends and relatives, and enjoy watching the movies with the children. I was somewhat embarrassed to see that one child at my kindergarten was trying to scroll a page of a picture book as if using a smart phone.

Meanwhile, mothers tend to form close ties at their children's kindergarten, rather than in their local community. It is believed in Korea that a high educational background will secure a stable life in the future (and obtaining a stable job in this society without an adequate safety net is a matter of importance). Such a heavy emphasis on education also applies to infants. If parents emphasize education rather

than childcare, they prefer high level educational facilities. If a kindergarten has a strong educational feature, it attracts parents who support this feature, leading to them forming closer ties among themselves. As a result, parents and children tend to follow a hierarchy from childhood.

I believe that the problem to be solved in the future is not only to secure enough facilities for children, but also to give greater consideration to the current situation and discuss child-rearing support, especially support to establish flexible measures and form local networks.

With the above in mind, as a mother, and also as a childcare worker, I look back on what I have been doing and also what children today are doing now.