Japanese Lessons

Benjamin, Gail R.

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A Working Vacation
and Special Events

SUMMER VACATION?

We had arrived in Japan near the end of June and had Sam and Ellen enrolled in school by the first week of July, so they had been in school only for a few weeks when summer vacation began. In Japan, since the school year runs from April 1 until the following March, summer vacation comes at the end of the first third of the school year. It was preceded by a flurry of newsletters from school, several notices from each classroom teacher, and a long letter from the principal himself. There was information about homework assignments, proper leisure time activities, regulation of living habits, suitable clothing, the date of the school meeting in the middle of the vacation, the schedule of swimming lessons, warnings about bicycle and fireworks safety, and for perhaps the first time this year, warnings about small children and the dangers of kidnapping. (There had recently been three disappearances of five-year-old girls near here, one later found dead. People were upset and somewhat at a loss as to how to react. Japanese children had not been taught before this to be wary of strangers.)

I tended to regard the information and suggestions about food, bedtimes, clothing, and so on as irritating and intrusive, probably
partly because it was hard for me to read it in Japanese. But I was told by a Japanese friend when I complained about it that this is a sign of the genuine, all-embracing concern that the school feels about its students.

The attitude that seemed to be expressed in these communiqués was that summer vacation is a period of fun, of excitement, and of danger. The danger arises from the possibility that the summer vacation will involve a change of routine and that the goals and habits established through hard work and vigilance in the previous months will be eroded. A change in routine is also felt to be dangerous for one's health, as are going to strange places and being among crowds of people, things likely to happen during the summer vacation.

A number of conditions help to minimize the dangers, however. First, this long vacation is not so long—six weeks, as opposed to twelve weeks or more in American schools. Second, very few families take vacation trips together during this time, since people who are employed full time seldom take more than two or three days in a row off from work, even though they are entitled to more. Families are most likely to take a few days to return to relatives' houses for the mid-summer holiday Obon, when the spirits of the ancestors return to their homes for three days.

Third, if one followed the school recommendations for daily living during vacation, children would get up and go to bed at their usual times, eat regular meals, have a scheduled time for homework and other activities, follow a timetable for accomplishing their homework assignments, and generally not succumb to chaos. It was never clear to me how many of these guidelines families actually followed. The school's suggestion that children not get together to play from 8:00 A.M. to 10:00 A.M. did seem to be adhered to; their suggestion that children not play outdoors between 1:00 P.M. and 3:00 P.M. was often not followed; and the admonition to wear a hat when playing outdoors was universally ignored.
The most important device to keep children on the straight and narrow is the homework. I culled out of all the written materials the homework assignments, and they seemed formidable. Had I been faced in America with the prospect of getting kids to do all this during a “vacation,” I would have contemplated changing schools. The work-load seemed an imposition on all of us. Summer vacation was going to be a major challenge to me in my effort to be a *kyoiku mama*.

Ellen, as a first grader, had the following assignments: First, there was a booklet of assignments in reading and math, with spelling exercises and addition and subtraction problems to do, practice in telling time, and handwriting. Children were expected to read at least three books and do picture reports on them, illustrating something about the book and their own reactions to it. For music there was a book of fifteen songs to practice on the *pianika* (an instrument that is blown into like a recorder but played with a piano-like keyboard). For physical education there were swimming lessons scheduled at the school on fifteen different days; students were required to attend at least five sessions.

For arts and crafts each child was to do a project of constructing some toy or useful object, and the result was to be taken to school for display. One of the newsletters that came home from school gave suggestions for this project. They all involved using a hammer and nails to make such things as a boat, a stand for flower vases, and a simple pinball game.

Each child was to make a collection, label it, and set it up for display. Different flowers, stones, seashells, or insects were suggested, but other choices were encouraged. Children were to draw three pictures of their vacation activities and take them to school to be displayed.

Each first-grade student also had a science project, keeping records on the growth of a morning-glory plant. In fact, it seemed to me that nearly every first-grade child in Japan was nourishing and observing a morning-glory plant, that year and probably every year. Friends would
say, "Ah yes, Ellen is in first grade. Does she have a morning glory?"
There was a sheet giving the proper format for recording measure-
ments of the plant's growth, weather records, and when buds, flowers,
and seeds appeared and how many there were.

Each child was also to do some other "independent research." Every bookstore had helpful materials about this. We bought a book
of first-grade project suggestions that outlined twenty-eight different
projects with clear instructions and materials lists, all written so that
first graders could read it. Most projects, it seemed to me, were within
the capabilities of a motivated first grader with a helpful mother willing
to tolerate some mess; they did not require much money.

The last major category of activities was helping around the house.
Japanese children do few or no chores at home; they are busy, and
mothers often feel it's easier to do the work themselves. But during
this long vacation, when they have so much free time, the school feels
they should help their mothers. For first graders the suggested activi-
ties included laundry, especially washing the school clothes and shoes,
folding laundry before it is put away, and ironing simple things like
handkerchiefs. Cleaning the bathtub was also suggested, as were
sweeping the sidewalk, going to the store on errands, and polishing
the floor.

The school provided a chart to record one's daily activities in the
categories of studying and helping at home; more elaborate and color-
ful ones are often given away by the bookstores where one purchases
the materials needed for the vacation school assignments.

In case your first grader has lots of extra time (unlikely, given these
assignments), a number of other worthwhile activities are suggested in
the school bulletins. For first graders these include making a hiragana
(alphabet) game, making a set of musical instruments for the whole
family, making mobiles to hang at home, making jewelry from house-
hold items, making a map of the neighborhood, and keeping a weather
record, along with a report of the emotions and feelings that are
stimulated by various aspects of the weather. Then there are various
contests children can enter, which involve designing a postcard, writing a letter or a postcard, calligraphy, or writing a composition and drawing a picture inspired by the seaside.

For Sam, in fifth grade, the pattern of summer vacation homework was much the same. There were drills to be done in math and Japanese, a construction project, two science projects, book reports, daily help around the house, swimming lessons, and contests to enter. Again, both the school and commercial publications provided help and suggestions. But there were many fewer communications from the classroom teacher about summer vacation, probably for two reasons: they are less necessary for students and families who have had several years of experience with summer vacation, as first graders have not, and also Sam may have been less conscientious about bringing everything home.

Sam and Ellen and I made some effort to do almost all of these assignments. In addition, the children had some Japanese lessons, and they both learned to read the Japanese syllabary—a total of 103 symbols sufficient for reading anything in Japanese that is written in the syllabary. For Ellen this meant she could read all her school materials, though she often didn’t understand what she was reading. By fifth grade the syllabary is augmented with kanji, Chinese ideographs, so Sam could not read his materials.

How did we do? First of all, it seemed like a burden and an imposition to all of us. Second, I didn’t realize early enough that there were special prescribed formats for a number of these assignments, such as science projects and drawings and book reports, and I also took what I am sure the teachers regarded as a typically careless American attitude toward some of the standardization. I tend to think that if the observations of the morning glory are done, and are correct, it doesn’t matter much what kind of paper they’re recorded on. This contrasts with a more Japanese notion that if you’re doing it you might as well do it right—in a format that ensures nothing is forgotten (and why not a format that someone else has figured out?), neatly, on nice paper,
showing the value you place on this effort and showing consideration for the audience. Even children’s summer homework is real work, deserving of the best materials and the best presentation.

This was my first experience with summer vacation homework in Japan. Some projects I thought were optional were really “required,” and some aspects of the formats for drawings and reports were less open to variation than I took them to be. I could have known more about these if I had asked more questions of friends. At that stage in our visit, however, I was feeling that I had been an incredible nuisance to everyone I encountered in Japan, and I didn’t enjoy the feeling of incompetence and childishness that having to ask so many questions gave me. So I didn’t ask as much as I should have. Our homework suffered from it.

Soon after the fall term of school started, when the many projects done over the summer were on display in the classrooms, there was a Parents’ Visiting Day attended by about two-thirds of the first-grade mothers in Ellen’s class. A large part of the banter between mothers focused on how well each mother had accomplished these projects. There was some competition over who had “helped” her child do the best job, some resentment over having had to do these projects, and some discomfort over whether mothers should participate so heavily in children’s schoolwork.

Somehow or other, though, we did manage to find vacation time very different from regular school days. Though no one I knew broke the school’s recommendation that children not contact each other for play between 8:00 A.M. and 10:00 A.M., children did play a lot during the rest of the day and in the evening. A lot of this play was more unsupervised than many American children enjoy these days. Because of the physical safety of children in Japan and because they are generally welcome in public places, children are free to come and go as they please, without adults feeling they need to know just where the children are at every minute. So a friend’s fifth-grade boy, who lives near a public swimming pool, would leave home about ten in
the morning to do whatever he wanted until five o’clock. He might spend time at the pool, go to a friend’s house, ride his bicycle, and go back to the pool, but until five o’clock no one checked up on his activities or whereabouts. Even younger elementary school children had this freedom.

Sam’s favorite play activity was fireworks, sold in many stores in Japan and intended for children to use—even the school only recommends that they be careful in doing so. These fireworks include not only sparklers, but also bottle rockets, fountains, and other delights forbidden to nearly all American children. Almost every night of the summer one can hear and see fireworks going off in Japanese neighborhoods. I let Sam use them, in spite of misgivings about safety and cost. I remembered how much fun it was to set them off with my cousins when I was young, and I’m not sure I could have kept Sam away from such a desirable activity. Fireworks are also part of the summer festivals of many towns and temples. We went to the city of Urawa’s display—the best fireworks I have ever seen, better than the one in Washington, D.C., on the Fourth of July during the Bicentennial.

We also went with friends who have children near Sam’s and Ellen’s ages to their grandmother’s house in a rural area of Nagano prefecture. My friend’s conversation revealed some of the advantages she saw in a week-long stay there for her children. It was nice to eat vegetables straight from the garden, to go to the dairy farm to buy milk, to work in the garden, to see the stars unobscured by city lights at night, to hear the sounds of frogs and insects, to observe farming activities in the fields, to walk along country roads with no traffic, and to spend time with the family instead of with friends in the neighborhood. Hiking in the mountains was an easy thing to do and didn’t involve a long train ride to get to a hiking place. All of us, adults and children, did enjoy these things; the pace of life was refreshingly different from the school term in the city.

The fifth- and sixth-grade boys in this family had the same sorts of
homework assignments ours did (and they did them all), but their family found the time to go to Nagano for a week, though the father, a junior high school teacher, was away supervising a trip for his students part of the time. Each of the boys also had an additional trip away from home. The sixth grader’s class went to the beach as a school group for four days, and the fifth grader went to a private camp, with horseback riding and other camping activities.

In spite of all the homework, then, this summertime vacation was indeed a vacation in the American sense, a time when daily schedules became more relaxed, when the demands of school were greatly diminished, when children had more freedom, and when their parents encouraged a delight in the moment itself, not emphasizing the serious business of preparing for adulthood.

I couldn’t help contrasting this summer vacation with my memories of summer as an American child, however. My (probably distorted) memories are of a long, long, period of time with very little structure, of boredom but also of unlimited time to do just what I wanted. I could read for hours on end, play hide-and-seek until after dark night after night, be at the swimming pool all day with friends, or play the piano without practicing for the next lesson. I could decide on the spur of the moment, without planning, what to do. It was the spontaneous, self-generated, unsupervised aspect of these activities that made summer vacation so wonderful.

Japanese adults, too, remember periods of time like this in their childhood. Even Japanese educators remember them and feel that Japanese children have lost a valuable part of life in having so many aspects of it controlled by home and school. They recall a vision of village life in which unsupervised groups of children of varying ages spent their leisure time “playing,” doing activities they invented, at their pace, with their own rules. Not only were these times fun, but looking back, adults feel that important lessons about inventiveness and independence, getting along together and tolerance for individuals, were learned.
In 1967–68 Thomas Johnson (1975) studied the peer group activities of the boys in fourth through ninth grades in a village about sixty miles west of Tokyo, including their summer activities. These boys all automatically belonged to the village boys’ club, which had an official existence with government funding, a clubhouse, and an official adult advisor. (He came to one club meeting in the eighteen months Johnson was an observer of the group.) This context seemed to make the parents feel the boys were safe. The boys were very concerned to behave well enough that they did not attract any adult attention to themselves or their activities, and they succeeded very well. Parents reported that sometimes their boys would be away from home for two or three days at a time, at the clubhouse, eating and sleeping there, sometimes stopping at home or at a friend’s house for food.

The boys planned and carried out an elaborate three-day camping trip but spent most of their time in more mundane activities like baseball and raiding watermelon patches. Ten to twenty hours of preparation would go into a foray to get two watermelons to share, watermelons that would have been given had they asked, or which they could have bought with club funds. They kept track of whose gardens had been stolen from, in order to be “fair” to the owners. Homework was a minor activity, apparently confined to frantic efforts the last two or three days before school started.

This degree of freedom is difficult to achieve in the urban settings where most Japanese children now live, and the school homework seems deliberately designed to make such a loose structure impossible. Feeling they cannot have their urban children just wandering around the neighborhood for days on end as village children do, parents are amenable to the lure of more structured activities, whether they are academic enrichment, homework, lessons, or supervised athletic activities.

Ordinary Japanese adults and parents, as well as teachers and educators, are caught between two conflicting views of summer vacation and life for children. On the one hand, education is seen as crucially
important for the success of individuals and the nation. There is so much to learn and so little time, that vacation is an unwelcome intrusion into a serious business. Teachers feel this way about all children; individual parents feel that because everyone else is working full time, vacation or not, their children must work equally hard not to miss out and fall behind the competition.

On the other hand, childhood is fleeting, and not everything can be learned in school; surely this constant supervision and adult agenda setting will make children more dependent, less able to act on their own initiative, less healthy, less able to develop and rely on their own inner resources. Neither of these conflicting views has been totally victorious in the battlefield of summer vacation, but it’s my impression that the “formal education is important” position is gaining the upper hand.

Sam and Ellen had just completed a school year before we came to Japan and definitely felt they had a school vacation coming to them. They felt the homework was too much—not too difficult, just too much. They liked the increasing feeling of competence that learning to read the syllabary gave them, and they liked the swimming lessons. They read (in English) with more pleasure than usual, and more than usual, in part because they had fewer friends than at home and television was not so attractive. They liked the fireworks, riding their bicycles, and the trip to Nagano. They liked not having a bedtime or a set time to get up. They liked the less regimented, less scheduled life.

I liked all these things, too, and would have enjoyed them even more if I hadn’t felt compelled to urge Sam and Ellen to make a somewhat credible showing in the homework assignments. They disliked my pushing them to do it and reminding them, and I resented having to do it. Still, taken all in all, those six weeks were a vacation; they gave us the chance to accomplish the second stage of settling into life in a new city and a new country, as well as to have some experiences that were pleasant in themselves.
Sports Day

No sooner had summer vacation ended than the schedule for September was sent home, with the announcement that Sports Day would take place on October 1. Sports Day is a major event in the school year and is the model for similar events held for younger children in preschools and for adults in various organizations, often those connected with employment. These events have been going on for many years, so parents and grandparents all have memories of their own participation in sports days, and many parts of the event have become traditional and unquestioned in format.

Sports Day at Okubo Higashi was set for a Sunday with the expectation that many parents would attend. During the month of September, some time every day at school was spent in preparing for this event, and four full days were scheduled for the whole school to practice together. Throughout September notices came home with more information about the equipment needed by children in different grades, the events they would participate in, lunch and transportation arrangements, the rain date, and the schedule for the day.

Fortunately, Sunday, October 1, was a beautiful day, sunny and just warm enough that jackets were not needed. The walking group from our buildings left at 7:20, because the children were supposed to be at school at 8:00 to get ready for ceremonial events that started at 8:30. The opening ceremonies began as all the students paraded onto the field in front of the school to music provided by the school marching band. Students and audience listened to the principal and several other people give short speeches. Everyone was encouraged to try hard and to be careful. Everyone sang a Sports Day song, and the huge loving cup that is awarded to the winning team was displayed. This ceremony was all orchestrated by a sixth grader who announced each speaker and called the school to stand to attention, bow, stand at ease, and begin
the first real event of the day, calisthenics by the whole student body. Following this, the students left the playing field for their assigned seating positions by grade and team color around the field.

For Sports Day the students of the school were divided into four teams: red, blue, green, and yellow. Students wore headbands of their team color on their caps. They were all wearing their physical education uniforms, which have a stripe of their class color and their name written in large characters on the shirt. Except for the first graders, each classroom had members on each team.

The schedule of events was as follows:

1. Calisthenics, whole school
2. Sixty-meter race, third grade
3. Race, first grade
4. Jump-rope dance, second grade
5. Obstacle race, sixth grade
6. Ninety-meter race, fourth grade
7. Pom-pom dance, third grade
8. One-hundred-meter race, fifth grade
9. Fifty-meter race, second grade
10. Animal Land dance, first grade
11. Pulling poles, fourth grade
12. Relay race, sixth grade
13. Horse battle, fifth grade
14. Short race, five-year-olds
15. Teachers’ relay-obstacle race
16. Folk dance, whole school
Lunch
17. Cheers and songs for each team
18. Tug of war, PTA
19. Tug of war, third grade
20. Capture the pole, sixth grade
21. Ball in basket, first grade
22. Fireworks dance, fourth grade
23. Big ball relay race, second grade
24. Gymnastics routine, fifth and sixth grades
25. Four-color relay race (batons), third through sixth grades
26. Calisthenics, whole school
Awarding of prize, closing exercises

I looked at this list of events and thought that we'd be there for a long day, but everything ran on schedule, and it was all over at 2:50.

Each child participated in seven of the events (those in the last relay race in eight), and band members also played three times during the day. So although there was a lot of waiting time for each child, there was a lot of doing time, too, and a lot of moving around to get into the right place at the right time for different events.

Everyone participated in several different types of events. One was whole-school activities: opening and closing calisthenics and the folk dance just before lunch. There were also team events for each grade, such as the third-grade tug of war or the horse battle by the fifth graders. In this event the forty-five members of each color team divide themselves into groups of five, four of whom put their arms around each others’ shoulders to support a fifth person who sits on their shoulders wearing a paper samurai hat. The point of the game is to protect your own paper hat while trying to capture or dislodge those of other teams. The team with the most of their own hats left at the end wins. Several games such as this one looked potentially dangerous to me and not like activities that schools would encourage. I didn’t see anyone get visibly hurt, though.

A third type of event for everyone was a noncompetitive group dance. The first graders did a dance imitating various animals to music, the second graders did a jump-rope routine to music, and the fifth and sixth graders together did a long and impressive gymnastics routine of
group balancing and pyramid formations. Some people say that girls like these events but boys don't; I saw no obvious lack of enthusiasm in the boys' performances.

Finally, everyone participated in at least one race, organized by grade level and scored by team color. In this school there are about 1,000 students, about 160 in each grade. Okubo Higashi School knows how you can get 160 children to run a race efficiently. First, all of them are lined up by height, girls in one line and boys in another. Then each line is divided into groups of six, which run the specified distance against each other. They line up at the starting line, are set off by a racing pistol shot, and run to the finish line. At the finish line, a group of monitors wearing vests numbered from one to six are waiting to escort the runners to areas for the first-place runners, second-place runners, and so forth and to record the teams of the first-, second-, and third-place runners of each group of six. Since the next cohort of runners will start very soon, more than one set of monitors are working. After everyone has run, the first-, second-, and third-place runners of each cohort get a ribbon to wear on their wrist, and the scores for the four color teams are announced. There is no runoff or other recognition of individual performances. All this moves very quickly—it took less than ten minutes, from entering the field to leaving it, to run twenty-four cohorts of third graders through a sixty-meter race and announce the results.

Children seem to run very hard in these races, the girls as enthusiastically and skillfully as the boys. ("Did you see those big girls running?" asked Ellen that night. "Their boobs bounced. I'm not going to run like that when I'm big.") All the race events were done to music—very lively Western classical music: Rimsky-Korsakov, or the Lone Ranger overture, or a very fast rendition of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." It must improve performance, as well as add to the general air of excitement and liveliness. As each cohort runs, a loudspeaker encourages the last-place runner, calling him by team color—"Red team, keep trying!"
The last race of the day was the only one involving selected participants. This was run as a relay race among the four color teams, and the contestants were the fastest runners of the third through sixth grades; only about 20 of the 160 or more students in each grade were chosen. The level of excitement and competition was very high during this race. It seemed like the high point of the day, but no recognition was given to any individual runners, and it's hard to discern individual performances in such a long relay race. Sam was able to talk that night about several boys he knew and how they did in this race, though.

Some of the events of the day were not for students. There was a relay race for the teachers, and all of them participated. One of the obstacles they each had to overcome in the race was determined by throwing a big die, introducing an element of chance that was not present in any other event. There was a tug of war for parents, with one team from each of the four named neighborhoods that send children to this school, and there was a race for five-year-olds who would be coming to the school the next year. They hadn't been coached for this event and seemed very unsure of how to do it or what the point was, but they were guided through the procedure by the principal and the first-grade teachers.

At the end of the day there were more short speeches. The highlight was the announcement of the official scores for the four teams, with the first- and second-place teams giving themselves big cheers, the winning team accepting the trophy for the year. In the closing speech appreciation was expressed for everyone's efforts, each grade's dance was acknowledged, and the day was declared a success.

The major impression created by Sports Day was the sense of lively, enthusiastic, competitive participation, culminating in the color teams' relay race near the end. Children are assigned to the different teams by their teachers, who attempt to make all the teams equal in ability. Children are not on the same color team every year, so these Sports Day teams are ones pulled together only for this one day, not ongoing groups. Each team has designated cheerleaders, both boys and girls, a
set of cheers, and a team song. The cheerleaders were pretty active all
day long during the competitive events. Score keeping for these events
was treated quite seriously. Under a tent awning a team of adults were
the official score keepers; they kept a running total of the scores for
each team, relayed to a group of students on the second-floor balcony
who posted large signs there throughout the day so that everyone
knew how the scores stood as the meet progressed. Winning the prize
for the team was clearly an incentive. The silver-colored loving cup is
about three feet high, adorned with ribbons from previous years’ win-
ing teams. It is displayed throughout Sports Day, and for the rest of
the year it is placed in a cabinet near the formal entrance to the school.

But there are also some curious features about the competitiveness
involved in Sports Day. For one thing, as explained in the description of
the races, there is never an individual winner identified. Second, there is
no weighting of points for different events, so that the most skilled per-
formances are not rewarded more. It felt to me that a great level of
competitiveness was stirred up by the cheering, the music, and the
vigorously competitive, and then just fizzled out. No winners, and no
resolution of the contests. Some individual students and some groups
of students did do much better than others in all of these events, but
there was no time at which their accomplishments were openly recog-
nized. For races, for instance, there were no runoffs to determine who
actually ran fastest in the fifth-grade race. These would have been easy
enough to organize, but the possibility was just ignored. During later
discussions at home, it became clear that somehow or other Ellen knew
she was the fastest runner in her class, and Sam thought he was number
three or four in the fifth grade. I asked many adults later why children
worked so hard in these events when there were no prizes and no
recognition for individuals. This question was greeted with looks of
amusement and the counterquestion, “Why not?”

During calisthenics and other activities the general impression is that
everyone is participating actively and correctly, but on closer inspec-
tion it can be seen that it’s a little ragged (compared to the dances we saw five- and six-year-olds in China doing, for instance, not compared to grade school performances in the United States). No one gives the appearance of actively resisting any particular activity, and most students do most activities enthusiastically most of the time, but if there’s some calisthenic exercise you don’t much like doing, and you sort of go through the motions, no one will stop the group activities to make you do it right. If your shoe comes untied, you stop to fix it. If you trip in the jump-rope exercise, you just get untangled and go on. The whole set of activities moves along at a very brisk pace, and 100 percent compliance or participation or enthusiasm doesn’t seem to be enforced. One result is that there’s a lot of activity packed into short periods of time and relatively little time spent waiting by the more compliant or more organized pupils for the slower ones to be ready.

Even during the sixth-grade obstacle race, some kinds of noncompliance were tolerated. The last obstacle was to jump onto and over a fairly high set of wooden boxes. Some children didn’t make it, but they and their teams were not penalized for failing to do it—everyone made some attempt. On the other hand, one boy forgot the somersault at the middle obstacle and went back to do that. In general those who made mistakes—missed a step in a dance, for instance—appeared to pick up and go on with equanimity and were certainly not singled out. The only exception may have been the encouraging remarks offered over the loudspeaker to the last-place runner in the races—I think I would have been embarrassed by them, but they may be felt as encouraging and helpful rather than derogatory. Overall, neither unusually good nor bad performances were overtly commented on.

I was very struck by how well organized everything was and how little teachers and adults seemed to be involved in running things. Early in the morning, students from the fifth and sixth grades were in charge of getting the physical apparatus set up—the scoreboard, the goal posts, the entrance and exit gates from the field, the awnings and
tables for the judges, the equipment for the different events. They stayed behind to put everything away at the end. The leaders of the opening and closing exercises were students, the people who fired the pistols for the races were students, the monitors who assigned places in the races were students. Except for the first and second grades, teachers did not take responsibility for getting groups of children into the right places at the right times for different events, and because each child participated in seven or more different events taking place at different times and in different group organizations, there was a lot of moving around "offstage." This all went very smoothly and unobtrusively. When children were waiting for their various turns, they sat in or near assigned seating areas, but they played together and sometimes went quietly to the sides of the playground to play in small groups. No one seemed to think this was amiss, and I didn't see any problems develop.

Teachers and schools have several objectives they want to accomplish through Sports Day besides having fun, a major and legitimate purpose, too. They want children to experience and practice cooperating in groups organized for specific endeavors. For this reason the teams involved in Sports Day do not correspond to other groups the students are used to working in, such as classroom groups. The students are prepared to run the day through long hours of practice, but then they are really left alone to do it in public. The teachers did not do a lot of coaching and prompting from the sidelines to be sure things ran smoothly. A whole month of preparation in school was spent to insure a day that was fun, was run by children, brought forth enthusiasm and effort from everyone, and recognized only group performances, not individuals, honoring only groups that would never operate again.

Sam and Ellen thought the day was fun and interesting, that the preparation was hard work, and that some events were challenging or even painful, such as being on the bottom of a pyramid in gymnastics, as Sam was.
**THE TRIP TO AKAGI**

September's big event was Sports Day, and October's was clearly going to be the fifth-grade trip to the Akagi Youth Nature Center. Akagi is a town in the mountains of Gunma prefecture about three and a half hours from Urawa by bus, where the Urawa board of education has established a nature study center. Sam's class, with the other four fifth-grade classes from Okubo Higashi, was going to spend two nights and three days there.

This trip gave us a chance to observe how 196 students with their chaperons prepare for an event like this—and to puzzle about the point of it all. My initial reaction was that there was a lot of work and preparation put into an event that turned out to have very little educational impact. I was probably wrong, as usual: a lot of effort was put into an event that had a different sort of educational import than I was expecting.

The first preparations for the children began in the home economics and practical arts class held twice a week. The project was to sew a knapsack to use while hiking at Akagi. Everyone purchased a kit from the school containing a printed quilted cloth, cord and fasteners, bias tape and needle and thread—everything needed for the project. The knapsacks were sewn by hand. They have a drawstring opening, finished seams on the inside, and binding on the open edges, with the drawstring also serving as shoulder straps. Sam's was light green with a print of cartoon dinosaurs. Years later it is still in use in our family for picnics and sleepovers, and it has stood up well; Sam did a good job of making it.

Everyone who travels in Japan carries some kind of pack or container for things one can't leave home without. For children this is an outlet for the expression of cuteness. Their backpacks or knapsacks are often in the form of animals or cartoon characters or decorated with elaborate appliqués. They can be bought but are also a favorite home
sewing project for mothers, and sometimes a project of the mothers' group in preschools or elementary schools.

I have seen classes of two- to four-year-olds walking from a day care center to the local park for an hour's play, every child equipped with a cute knapsack. When children travel with adults on trains or buses, even one-year-olds often have a pack. I don't know what's in these all the time, but I do know what went to Akagi, because the directions about what to put in were included in the instructions for the trip.

For parents the first official preparations were at a meeting for parents (mothers) held at school during the day. Since all fifth graders in Urawa make this field trip each year, everyone knows that this will be on the agenda sometime during the year, and probably everyone but me had heard about trips made by other children. Mothers who attended the meeting signed in on a class sheet. (I was interested to see that it was a sheet for the whole year and there were spaces to record attendance for a number of events.) The principal and each of the four fifth-grade teachers spoke about the arrangements and purposes of the trip. I should have paid more attention to the announced purposes, because they turned out to be the real ones, too. They were reiterated in the written materials we were given.

The stated purposes of this trip were (1) to experience with one's own eyes and ears the natural beauty of Akagi and to see the plains below the mountains, (2) to strengthen body and soul by being in the mountains, and (3) by working and playing together, indoors and out, to experience the joy and importance of group living. In their talks, the teachers also stressed that for many children this would be an important experience in independence from their families. For many children, including Sam, it would be their first experience away from home with a big group for so long.

Mothers were asked to help prepare their children for the experience by making sure they could make decisions by themselves about what clothes to wear, according to activities and weather, that they could determine by themselves whether or not they were sick, that they
could handle their own bedding, and (especially for girls) that they could do their own hair. A week before the trip each child had to take a stool sample to school for some kind of a health check; I never figured out what. We were also supposed to keep daily records of our child’s temperature and send those to school a couple of days before the trip. Later we were told that the students were supposed to take a thermometer with them and take and record their temperatures seven times during the three days! All the food for the trip would be provided except a box lunch for the bus trip there, which children were to bring from home. The only written instructions about the lunch were that no cans or bottles were allowed.

During the question period, almost every question asked was about this box lunch. My puzzlement about this preoccupation with the lunch lasted for years, until I read Lois Peak’s *Learning to Go to School in Japan*, where she discusses the role of the lunch from home at school (1991:90–94). She proposes that the home-packed lunch is a symbol of *amae* in an environment where *amae* conflicts with values of group participation. Because it is the focus of two conflicting sets of values, it is the topic of intense concern and much discussion. I think her analysis also sheds light on other topics that were more salient for Urawa mothers and teachers than I anticipated, for example, the concern with decisions about clothes and sickness, especially knowing whether or not you are sick.

In order to understand the importance of a lunch brought from home, it is helpful to consider the differences between home and school, a part of the world outside. According to Peak and other observers of Japanese childhood and domestic life, home and school are two very different kinds of places in Japan. Home is not a miniature society, and school is not a place for indulgent individualism. At home two important kinds of emotion and behavior are expected. One is *amae* and the other is “skinship.” *Amae* is the feelings and behaviors appropriate between people who have a relationship of loving dependence based on an intense individual hierarchic bond between them.
Japanese do not think that infants are born knowing how to be loving dependents; teaching them this is the family’s, especially the mother’s, most important job. Usually, emphasis is put on the dependence of the child in this relationship, but I believe the mother becomes almost equally dependent for emotional support and validation on the child she teaches to feel and behave this way.

“Skinship” is a set of behaviors that enables people to feel *amae*. It refers to skin-to-skin contact, the close, intimate physical contact that is a feature of Japanese child rearing and family life. “Skinship” includes, for example, bathing together and sleeping close together. Practicing these behaviors in effect almost erases the skin barrier between isolated individuals such as a mother and her infant. What one body feels becomes accessible to the other. Thus, the ability of Japanese mothers to toilet train their children very early is partly a matter of being so tuned in to body cues from the child that the mother knows when the child is ready to urinate or defecate and so is able to hold an infant over the toilet to do it. Similarly, mothers’ use of a hissing-sounding word to stimulate children to urinate means that the child is accepting and acting on the mother’s perception of its physical needs. Mothers and children spend a lot of time in physical contact, sleeping together, bathing together, and nursing. Mothers seldom use child restraint devices such as infant seats, high chairs, or playpens, instead carrying their babies on their backs as they do housework. Even outdoors, strollers are less commonly used than in the United States. One of my favorite articles of Japanese material culture is the winter coat that fits over both mother and baby. When women carrying babies on their backs talk with one another, they always position themselves so that the babies are participants in the conversations. In the Japanese view of child rearing, the mother’s job is to erase the gap between the infant and herself that exists at birth and to draw the child into a social relationship so rewarding that it will encourage the child to want the other social relationships that are the defining features of a truly human life.
Among the things that mothers (and other caretakers to a lesser extent) do for children to increase “skin” contact, is to dress and undress them, to wash them, to comb their hair, and to check on their body state and health, for example their temperature, fairly constantly. But the approved *amae* behavior of letting your mother decide whether you are hot or cold, tired or hungry or sick, is impossible if you’re away on a school trip. Teachers are not substitute mothers; the responsibility for making and acting on such decisions must be passed to the children, not the teachers.

The box lunch is a bridge from home and *amae* to school and group life. Box lunches prepared by mothers are expected to be individual, appealing to the child, elaborately prepared, and presented as a symbol of the mother’s attention to her own child. Box lunches are usually complicated affairs by American standards. They include rice and four to six other items of food, for example a bit of pickled vegetable, a slice of hard-boiled egg, two or three bites of vegetables boiled in soy sauce, and one or two bites of fried chicken or fish. There is usually some decoration included, a flower or a pretty leaf, or a design drawn on the rice with sesame seeds. One can buy magazines illustrating how to make nutritious, appealing box lunches for young children; they sell well. The magazines and other “authorities” on rearing children say that the lunch should contain food cooked especially for the occasion, not a collection of leftovers.

Food that children get at school lacks these qualities. It is the same for each child, and starting in preschool the child is expected to eat everything, without regard for individual likes and dislikes. In preschool children are encouraged/forced to eat everything their mothers send, and mothers are encouraged to include some problematic items in their lunch boxes. (The year Sam was in kindergarten in Japan, he and I both scored a lot of points because I included raw carrots in his lunch, and he ate them. This is the least favorite food of Japanese children and many adults.) In elementary school, the school kitchen prepares the food, and children are encouraged/forced to eat everything.
The mothers' emotional concern with the box lunch for the first day, revealed in the number of questions at the preparation meeting, was in effect a concern for the degree to which they would be allowed to indulge their children at the beginning of this period of group life, life with no *amae*.

Other behaviors, health monitoring and dressing children properly, are also part of *amae*. In order to enable mothers to participate, if only by preparations and vicariously, in keeping their children clothed and well, detailed information about the weather at Akagi was included in the booklets for parents—a chart of the monthly average high and low temperatures and the average number of days of sunshine, cloudy weather, rainfall, and snow, to be compared with the information given for Urawa. The thermometer that children took along and the chart for keeping track of their temperatures were also, I think, meant to be reassuring to parents, to make them feel that children had the needed information to gauge their own state of health.

I think this symbolism accurately reflects Japanese feelings and preoccupations, but in practice, by the time children are in fifth grade their mothers are no longer routinely dressing them, washing them, and making all the decisions about their feelings of health. It seemed to me that children had great freedom to make such decisions themselves without parental nagging. At the time I didn’t believe that mothers could still be combing their fifth-grade daughters’ hair either, but later, as the mother of a fifth-grade daughter, I did it, for exactly the same reasons Japanese mothers do. It’s legitimate, intimate body contact; neither of us was anxious to give it up, though by sixth grade Ellen refused to let me do it anymore. Sam also recalls that neither he nor anyone else in his sleeping room ever took their temperature and that teachers did sometimes make people dress sensibly. So the differences in practices between home and school were not quite so extreme as the symbolism.

There was a symbolic bridge at the other end of the trip, too. The ¥9,000 each child paid for this trip included charges for transporta-
tion, food, and lodging, as might be expected, but also ¥1,000 for souvenirs. There was a shop at the nature center for buying these, and children used the allotted money to remember as many relatives as necessary. Sam brought home thoughtful gifts for each of us.

The purposes of the trip outlined for the mothers at their meeting, to enjoy nature, to strengthen body and soul, and to enjoy group life, determined the kinds of preparations that preceded it. The pleasure and the experience were the point of the expedition. There was no need to justify the trip by making it a means to do science experiments, for instance, or by requiring children to write compositions about it, or other activities that often accompany American field trips. The trip was an end, not a means to some other end.

Since the experience itself was important as a positive group life experience, tremendous preparation went into these aspects of the trip. Everything that was not individual was planned in advance, written down, and predictable. Written materials distributed to parents and children enabled everyone to carry out the necessary activities with no surprises or unpredictable demands. There were three lists of things to take in three printed pamphlets of information, one from school and two from the nature center. The list from school included P.E. hat, school name tag, free choice of clothes (suggested wear was jeans or long pants and long-sleeved shirts), a jacket, comfortable shoes, rain gear, the knapsack, five or six plastic sacks, something to sit on, towel, toilet paper (the standard little packages of Kleenex), gloves, pajamas, bellyband (optional), two sets of underwear, more than three pairs of socks, a towel, a toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, a comb (put these small things in a little bag), a sweater, a pack for carrying all this, the guide book for Akagi, a thermometer, pencils, an eraser, a pocket songbook, handkerchiefs, medicines one might need, such as antihistamines or dramamine, shoes for inside the building, a kerchief to wear while cleaning, a cleaning rag, an apron, a hat and a mask for those serving food, and the box lunch for the first day (no cans or bottles)—name on everything. Additions from the other lists: a notebook, newspaper, a
water bottle, a warning about warm enough clothes, a hat, earmuffs, ski gloves, a flashlight, hand towels, colored pencils, a sketch book, postcards, a book, games.

Bringing all these things would assure that nearly any emergency could be met and that leisure moments could be filled by activities that students were equipped to carry out. We managed to get together all but a few items from these lists, and Sam carried it all in a large backpack we borrowed from friends. It added up to quite a few pounds of belongings in bulky packs and containers that the children had to handle alone. They had to walk to school the day of departure with all of it and manage it by themselves on the bus and at the center. The luggage compartment was used only for the teachers' gear. Most children carried everything themselves, but a few mothers came running after with some forgotten item, usually the water bottle.

The buses were scheduled to leave at 8:30, and the children were to be at school at 8:00 to get ready. At that time there was a brief meeting to introduce the college students who were going to help chaperon and to get everyone lined up, and so on. About a third of the children's mothers had come along to see them off; the principal was there, too, being helpful, pointing out that bicycles should be moved out of the path of the buses, for example. The buses pulled away from the school at 8:31.

Both students and parents had detailed schedules for each day's activities. The second day's schedule is given below, translated from the one in Sam's guidebook.

DAY 2

6:30 get up
    wash
    put away bedding
7:00 cleaning assignments
    take temperature
7:30 morning meeting
8:00 breakfast
pick up box lunches
outside play

9:00 hiking—a choice of several trails; what to put in the knapsack: towel, jacket, rain gear, lunch, water bottle, snack, gloves, something to sit on, garbage container, toilet paper; in case of rain: activities at the center

3:30 return to Nature Center
milk and snack

5:00 evening meeting
flag lowering

5:30 supper

6:30 study meeting

8:00 baths
journal
letters

9:00 get ready for bed

9:30 go to bed

10:00 lights out

This schedule doesn’t begin to reveal just how much was preplanned. The booklet that each child had also listed which children would sleep in each room, what duties they were assigned, when they would bathe, where they would sit in the dining hall, where they would sit on the bus and at the first evening’s campfire meeting, when they were expected to be on duty to do their assigned chores (for example, the food helpers were to clean the water bottles at 8:00 p.m. on day two), and full menus for each meal.

This seemed to me like overkill, but it did mean that teachers didn’t have to keep reminding people of what came next, what they should be getting ready for. Maybe it was reassuring for children to have this much predictability. Several years later our family took a long trip to Australia with a complicated itinerary. Sam and Ellen asked me questions a dozen times a day about where we were going, when we would change planes, where we would sleep. I finally remembered the trip to Akagi and prepared for each of them a schedule of everything I knew.
about flights, stopovers, hotel names, and so on. They kept them in their packs, consulted them often, and stopped bothering me.

Each child at Akagi was assigned to a work group, and each group had specified duties. For some groups, such as those responsible for helping with food, the recorded duties were no more detailed than that. There is such a group at school too, and by fifth grade everyone understands what jobs must be accomplished by this group and can easily organize themselves to get them done. For others, such as the recreation group, much more specific assignments were included in the guidebook. Who would lead the songs at the morning and evening meetings, who would think up games for the bus, who would play the part of the fire spirit at the campfire: all these were individually assigned to recreation group members.

As a result of this organization and planning, the purposes of the trip were accomplished. Because many things were decided in advance, precious time at Akagi did not have to be spent on organizational matters. Everyone could experience the beauty of the natural setting undistracted by figuring out who was going to do what next. Equally important, each child made a clear contribution to the group living experience and benefited in visible ways from everyone else’s contributions. Everyone gave, everyone received. Teachers were able to remain in their preferred background role, available but seemingly no more central than any other group member. They weren’t needed to give orders or make moment-by-moment decisions about children’s activities, and they didn’t have to do a lot of heavy-handed disciplining. Everyone, children and teachers alike, was able “by working and playing together, indoors and out, to experience the joy and importance of group living.” Did it work? Sam reported that they had a good time, nothing went wrong, the teachers didn’t get mad at anyone, and they didn’t feel oversupervised—no one enforced the lights out, for instance. It was fun. Everyone got a picture of the group as a souvenir.