9. Enlisting Mothers' Efforts

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I can read Japanese but usually with difficulty, so I noticed the volume of communications that came home from school more than I would have had they been in English—it seemed like a lot. There were scheduled publications, such as the monthly newsletter for the whole school, the monthly letter for each grade, and the monthly menus for school lunch. There were also occasional items like advice about summer vacation and glossy printed collections of writings by the children.

From my point of view perhaps the most useful of the school communications was the monthly school newsletter. After struggling through the first few letters from the principal, which make up about a third of the material each month, and finding they were philosophical reflections on holidays or on reaching the current stage of the school year or on the goals of education for life, I stopped making the effort to read them. But I looked at the monthly feature listing the outstanding achievements of individual students in city art exhibitions or sports competitions or science projects for the names of children in Sam’s and Ellen’s classes or of other people I knew. I learned I had better check out the announcements for daily events, because they included notices about early closing, days with no lunch, class trips, when extra fees were due, meetings for mothers to attend, and in general any events...
that might involve a change of daily plans. Announcements about when the students’ eyesight would be tested didn’t require any action on our part but were interesting to know about.

I always felt that our family was just barely coping with life in Japan, and I occasionally took comfort from some of the items in the newsletter. Each family with a child at Okubo Higashi needs to keep an account at one of two local banks; each month on an announced date the school withdraws a certain amount from the account to pay for lunches and extra materials the teacher has purchased for each child (drills and practice tests, usually). The two authorized banks were very small local ones, inconvenient to use for most of our family’s banking purposes, and our main account was at another bank. Reading the item explaining the difficulties faced by the school because too many families were not keeping enough money in this account to cover their fees made me realize that I was not the only one who sometimes forgot to deposit money there. I also wondered about what sorts of reciprocal favors were behind the practice of using only these two banks, but I never got around to asking.

Besides the newsletter for the whole school, there was also one for each grade each month—not each homeroom, but each grade, with usually four classes in each grade. As a regular feature, each of these included a brief description of the topics to be covered in each subject, a summary of notices about daily happenings in each grade (this was a repetition from the all-school newsletter, usually), and reports on activities of the grades, such as the swimming levels attained by the fifth graders during the summer vacation lessons or explanations of the grading system for the upcoming report cards.

There were also admonitions from the teachers about what parents should be doing to help their children at home. At New Year’s time the fifth-grade teachers reminded us that we should coach our children on the proper forms and etiquette for offering New Year’s greetings and help them decide wisely how to use the money they received as gifts. I felt that none of these things were any business of the school
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and that the teachers were being insulting by telling me my duties as a mother. I am assured by my Japanese friends, however, that this is an unwarranted interpretation. Such messages only express the teachers' concern for the total well-being of their students.

The advantage of these monthly newsletters was that they gave parents advance notice of school activities in a compact form. If your kid could get only two pieces of paper a month home safely, about the extent of what Sam usually bothered with, you would be prepared for whatever was likely to happen at school. There wouldn't be late-night announcements about crucial equipment for a project absolutely needed the next morning. We were told at the beginning of November about the calligraphy supplies needed by the fifth graders for their New Year's writing, and parents were informed about ongoing projects, such as the month of practice needed before the jump-rope test. The disadvantage for me was the feeling that I was being nagged about my own job and getting more advice than I wanted.

I also didn't always interpret correctly what I was supposed to do about some of the information, and sometimes Sam and Ellen suffered because of it. I didn't realize that I should take the announcement about jumping rope as a serious homework project, so I didn't nag Ellen into practicing as a Japanese mother would probably have done, and she did very poorly on the test. When the October fifth-grade newsletter mentioned that the children would be going to the temple to do watercolors, I should have taken that as a signal that Sam would need paints and equipment, and I should have purchased them. (And I would have known what paints and equipment he needed, if I'd had art lessons in school in Japan.) These were symptoms of my failure to realize until late in the year how, as a mother, I was supposed to be active in the school work of my children. Both the children and the school had a right to expect me to live up to this responsibility, and I just didn't sometimes. I knew intellectually that Japanese mothers are more active, more encouraging, more involved, and more necessary than I am in America; it just didn't sink in emotionally and practically.
The most constant form of communication was the renrakucho for first graders. Older children did not have a daily renrakucho; they are supposed to be more independent and responsible. Renrakucho means “communication booklet,” and I was familiar with the idea from Sam’s and Ellen’s previous sojourns in day care and kindergarten. It is a booklet that is read and written in every day by both the teacher and the parent. Both stamp it with a seal every day, and any information that needs to be passed back and forth is included.

In Ellen’s day care center, the renrakucho included daily notations of bowel movements, sleeping times, and times and amounts of eating, as well as comments on her mood or general well-being. (I think I was supposed to send back similar information about her behavior at home, but I didn’t figure this out until near the end of her stay, and I might not have done it anyway.) Any information about schedule changes, medicines, or the like could also be included. When Sam was in kindergarten, his renrakucho did not include so much information about physical health, but nearly every day brought comments from the teacher about his activities, ranging from “Today Sam led the class in opening exercises” to “He certainly does like the swings!”

In first grade the renrakucho includes not only daily homework assignments and reports on classroom activities but also special announcements or reminders. Ellen’s teacher wrote the daily message on the blackboard, and it was copied by each student, so that it was part of the training in handwriting, and so that parents could see the progress their children were making in this area. Ellen’s notes became easily legible in about a month. Parents are to stamp the booklet daily, and the teacher also stamps it, to show that she has checked for messages from home.

This stamp, or hanko, is a seal with the family name carved on it that is pressed into a block of red ink and then stamped on the document. Signatures are not “legal” in Japan; the family seal or hanko is. Families usually have more than one copy of their hanko, and it is okay for anyone in the family to use it if the occasion arises—to sign for a delivery,
for instance. You can buy a hanko for your name if it’s a fairly common one in most stationary stores or department stores; otherwise, you have it individually carved. In addition, families have a hand-carved hanko registered with city hall for use in the most important transactions such as the sale of real estate. The possibilities for fraud in this situation seem not to be a danger in the thinking of most Japanese, and Ellen absorbed the notion that it was all right for her to sign my initials, which I used instead of a hanko, in the renrakucho. In Japanese terms, it was.

The renrakucho seems an innocuous if effective technique of enlisting home cooperation and involvement in the daily life of school. Its potential power came home to me strikingly in an incident that occurred during the first few weeks that Sam and Ellen were attending Okubo Higashi School. You may remember from the description of school equipment and the material to be carried in the backpack each day that my initial reaction was that this was a burdensome list of duties, one that it would be unreasonable to expect someone of Ellen’s age to be able to carry out alone. I took a deep breath, told myself it would be good experience in Japanese mothering techniques, and prepared to take on partial responsibility for seeing that everything needed got taken to school each day.

One day the renrakucho came home with a note saying that entirely too many things were being forgotten; we should work hard to improve the situation. At the time I thought this note was unique to Ellen’s renrakucho; now I think it went home to everyone. My reaction amazed me: I immediately became angry with Ellen. I scolded her and started talking about how getting ready for school really was her responsibility, after all. All this, I think, to avoid a scolding from her teacher aimed at me! I don’t like being reprimanded by teachers. If not forgetting things was Ellen’s responsibility, not mine, then I wasn’t the one getting the scolding. And so I added my pressure for performance of this set of tasks to the school’s moral weight, all so I could avoid getting in trouble with the teacher, even though I had decided the job was too onerous for a seven-year-old!
Within a few hours I got over my irritation with Ellen (and offered an apology). I was disappointed in my susceptibility to such underhanded manipulation by the school, or by authorities in general, became indignant at the use of such techniques to enlist home support for school goals, and ended in a reluctant admiration for whoever devised such an effective form of coercion. I decided to keep on helping Ellen, accept my failures, and not take it out on her.

All this emotion engendered by two sentences in a daily communication notebook! Schools send home dozens of notes, newsletters, and announcements during the course of a school year. When I read this note about forgetting things, I knew right away that we were guilty and that it was addressed to us (and at the time it didn’t occur to me that other homes were getting the same message). The guilt I felt myself surely added to the intensity of my reaction.

In other situations, when I read advice and reminders about things to do such as making sure that my children gargled each time they came home during the winter, I was able to ignore the instructions with absolutely no emotional reaction. But this business about forgetting school supplies is one that I didn’t disagree with the school about; I too think children need to learn to be responsible for their own school activities.

Most of the behaviors and attitudes schools try to instill in children in Japan are ones that find widespread acceptance among Japanese parents, who also largely agree that it is legitimate for schools to teach children these things. The constant reinforcement of these values in school communications and the somewhat admonitory tone of the writing probably is in the long term an effective way of enlisting pressure from home on children to enhance the school’s attempts to teach proper behaviors and attitudes. Another way of looking at it is that these communications are ways of reminding mothers that their role as kyoiku mama, “education moms,” is one the school system counts on, not one that is optional for them. Some mothers find ways to evade some of the tasks schools ask them to carry out, and I am sure all of
them do the kind of selecting of important admonitions from the mass of school communications that I did. But I also think that the volume of information and advice and demands resulted in a higher level of cooperation. Maybe every mother could decide to ignore 20 percent of what the school suggested or demanded, but following 80 percent of a hundred directions means that mothers are doing a lot. It also means that mothers are willing to live with a certain amount of guilt from not perfectly fulfilling their role, or at least one perception of their role that gets a hard sell in modern Japanese culture.

It is perhaps too extreme to call the kyoiku mama syndrome a problem, but it is something that Japanese often talk about with some ambivalence. Discovering the relationship between mothers and schools in the educational success and childhood experiences of Japanese was one of my goals for this year in Japan, and the attitudes expressed by Japanese about the issue were important elements for the conclusions I drew.

School and home reinforce each other in the messages they send to children, but they do not duplicate each other exactly, I think. Basically, elementary schools operate in terms of motivations for learning that are fundamentally centered in peer groups and social relations. Competition and getting on in the world are relegated to a very subordinate role. Motivations for learning in elementary schools, that is, are organized to exploit children’s immediate social appetites (see chapter 10 for more on this topic).

Parents, and particularly mothers, play two different supporting roles to the elementary schools. First, and not at all trivially, mothers facilitate and support their children’s participation in school requirements and activities. They do this in a number of ways. They make it possible for their children to meet the simple physical demands of school by providing the children with art equipment when it is needed; clean shoes, gym clothes, and lunch clothes; and materials called for in summer vacation homework. They put school activities
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ahead of other activities the family might engage in. They provide study time and space; they either arrange for juku attendance or do the drilling and tutoring themselves.

They absorb the frustrations and rebellion children sometimes feel about the demands of school, and they do this not by heavy-handed authoritarian methods, which they feel are not successful in the long run, but by sympathy, cajoling, support, and encouragement. By both Japanese and American standards this is hard work, difficult in conception and tedious in execution.

By their own cooperation with the demands that the school places on them and their children, they legitimate the school's demands for their children. In most cases they may indeed agree with the school about the requirements for education, but probably every mother has reservations about some school practices. For me, one that seemed particularly silly was the card Ellen and Sam had to take with them for every swimming lesson, on which I recorded their temperature that morning and indicated that they were not ill. I did not take a stand on this issue, however; I dutifully filled out the card and made sure it was included with swimming suit and towel when they went off to swimming lessons. I didn't even comment about it much. As I remember it, I even went through the ritual of taking their temperature, though sometimes only by feeling their forehead and making up a number for the card.

During summer vacation we went to a local festival with friends who had a son Sam's age. The mother explained the timing of dinner before we went out by saying the school had a rule that children should be home by 9:30 in the evening during vacation, so we had to eat early to get back by then. She said she thought this was really none of the school's business, and not very rational, but it was a rule.

When parents go along with such rules and arrange life to accommodate school rules and regulations, they are sending a powerful message to children that this is the way things are and should be; their behavior validates the notion that schools can impose standards for
behavior and performance on children and adults. Thus, schools have their requirements legitimated, not subverted or challenged.

The second way in which school demands are reinforced by parents is not by duplicating school motivations but by adding a second set. This second set is focused more on long-range preparation for life and on competition. Elementary schools certainly see their job as preparing children for life, but they do not expect this motivation to be very strong for children, and they do not rely on it to be the basis for elementary school learning. Parents are the ones who most often and most forcefully articulate the preparing-for-life motivation for children during these years, not necessarily by talking about it, though they do that, too, but by letting it motivate them in their actions. Even if parents feel that school is too demanding, that summer vacation should be free from homework, that going to juku after school and on weekends is too much, when they see that other children are doing these things, they feel they cannot let their own children get behind. It takes an exceptionally strong set of parents to resist this desire to “keep up with the Tanakas.” Parents feel that this is a competition in which they must not handicap their children. The long-term and competitive nature of learning and learning activities is foremost in their minds and is communicated to their children.

Junior high school and high school will later reinforce these aspects of learning, but they are introduced first in the family, as a different and additional motivational framework for children. It’s not a long step for competition between children for long-term success in education to become a competition between mothers for both long- and short-term success of their children in education. It is widely recognized as unhealthy for both mothers and children when mothers end up doing a lot of homework or summer vacation projects and evaluating their success as mothers by the success of their children in school examinations and competitions. Since the help or cooperation of mothers is in fact necessary for the success of children, however, it is difficult for mothers to avoid this trap.
It is also difficult, Japanese say, for a healthy emotional relationship between mothers and children to survive the demands of education. On the one hand, Japanese parents are committed to persuading rather than forcing children to do well in school. (Parents in many countries who have tried forcing children to do well in school have found that the children ultimately have the upper hand in this game, to the detriment of everyone involved.) An emotional tie between mother and child is the primary context for this persuasion. In the *amae* relationship the lack of differentiation between the identity and interests of the two parties, mother and child, is legitimate to some degree. But that lack of differentiation enables mothers to use their own potential shame as a goad to performance by the child. It is, in this dynamic, the mother who will be hurt by a child’s poor performance, and the child’s unwillingness to hurt the mother means that mothers can use tactics I identify in the United States as emotional blackmail.

Such tactics are likely to increase in high school. One Japanese friend, who recalls his high school years as exciting and rewarding and less difficult than those faced by his own children, told how his mother, to share in the feelings his efforts produced and to help him, took (and carried out) a vow to pray for his success every four hours around the clock during his three years of high school. How could anyone not do his homework while this was going on? He made it into Tokyo University. I have also heard of mothers giving up a favorite food or beverage, such as tea, for the duration of their children’s struggles in high school.

On the other hand, many Japanese recognize that this degree of *amae* can and often does lead to a undesirable loss of will and individuality in both the mother and the child. *Kyoiku mama* is a term that recognizes the contributions mothers make to a child’s education and development, but it also recognizes the dangers to both mother and child in the process. It is in several ways, as my friend commented, “difficult to be the mother of an elementary school child.”