

Expedite efforts to ensure day-care centers for children on waiting lists ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Reducing financial burdens alone cannot ensure peace of mind for families with small children. It is necessary to work toward ensuring and improving nursery facilities at the same time.

The revised children and child-rearing support law, which would provide free infant education and childcare, has been enacted. Fiscal sources for this will be secured from revenue generated by the consumption tax rate hike to 10 percent scheduled for October, when the enacted support measures will be implemented for infants aged 3 to 5 as well as those in low-income families aged 0 to 2.

Free childcare will be offered at licensed nurseries, certified childcare centers and some kindergartens. Free childcare will also be provided at unlicensed facilities and for babysitting depending on the requirements to be met, including the employment of parents or guardians, with an upper limit set for such support. The planned support measures will be on a large-scale, covering 3 million people and calling for annual spending of ¥780 billion.

Free childcare is a centerpiece of the government policy aimed at realizing “social security for all generations.” Taking into account population decline and a super-aging society, the free childcare service is designed to boost assistance for child-rearing families, thus aiming to curb the birthrate decline.

This policy concept is right, but concern cannot be dispelled that this planned uniform free service will lead to pork-barreling of fiscal allocations. Fees for utilizing such facilities as childcare centers have already been reduced or exempted depending on the income levels of parents or guardians, so high-income families will disproportionately benefit from the free service. The introduction of an income limit system is a matter to be studied.

More serious for families raising children is the problem of children on waiting lists for entering childcare centers. Those on lists centering on urban areas totaled 47,000 as of last autumn. The significance of the free childcare system will be reduced if it is impossible to receive such services.

Ensure quality childcare

With the introduction of the free childcare system, the needs of childcare facilities are expected to expand. The government aims to augment such institutions over three years to the end of fiscal 2020 so they become capable of accommodating 320,000 children. It is imperative to steadfastly resolve the issue of children on waiting lists. If the implementation of measures to deal with the issue are delayed because the necessary budget cannot be secured due to the introduction of free childcare, it will all come to nothing.

Improving the quality of childcare is also a challenge to be tackled.

Free childcare will apply to unlicensed facilities as well, but there are big differences in the quality of services they provide, because regulations on personnel arrangements and the required area for facilities are lax compared with those for licensed institutions. Seventy percent of fatal accidents have occurred at unlicensed childcare centers. Moreover, as a transitional measure, free childcare will apply even to facilities that cannot meet certain requirements over a period of five years.

In view of the fact that unlicensed facilities are used by many children who could not be admitted to licensed institutions, we have no objection to the free childcare system for unlicensed institutions per se, but its introduction should not lead to allowing subpar facilities to be left intact. It is essential to boost administrative supervision and assistance for turning unlicensed institutions into licensed ones.

With regard to domestic standards for licensed facilities, it has been pointed out that they are lower than international criteria. From the viewpoint of ensuring children’s safety and healthy development, it is necessary to expedite improvements in the staffing of childcare workers and in expanding training seminars for them.

Securing the recruitment of childcare workers is a prerequisite for the expansion of childcare facilities and the improvement of their quality. Such institutions face serious manpower shortages. Further improvement is called for in the treatment of childcare workers.

The introduction of free childcare services should serve as a starting point to establish a system under which all children will be able to receive quality childcare and education.

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