

# Childcare leave needs recognition as the rule, not the exception [JP] <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Mainichi Daily News

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 26 Jun 2009

## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

Following the economic downturn that started in autumn last year, the unwarranted sacking of workers who take childcare leave has become a social problem in Japan.

Seventy percent of women in Japan who are employed before getting married quit their jobs when they give birth, and a mere 1.56 percent of men take childcare leave. It remains a fact in Japan that childcare leave is difficult to take and has not made an impact in combating the nation's declining birthrate.

The childcare leave system was introduced to create an environment making it easier for couples who were raising children to work as Japan's birthrate continued to decline. However, Japan lags far behind various countries in Europe in its provision of a childcare leave system.

In an attempt to improve the situation, a revision to the law on child-care and family-care leave was passed unanimously by the House of Councillors on Wednesday and came into effect. The law establishes a limit on daily working hours of six hours for employees who have children under the age of 3, and requires business owners to exempt such workers from overtime. Other revisions include enabling childcare leave to be taken by dual-income families up until the child is 14 months old (previously 1 year old), and releasing the names of companies that do not comply with warnings issued in response to illegal treatment.

Institutionalization of shortened working hours and exemptions from overtime is possible if business owners change their way of thinking and adopt a positive approach. But for this to happen, managers, bosses and work colleagues need to accept the principles of the revised law and broaden the system supporting workers who take childcare leave.

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A highlight of Japan's revised law is a measure against unfair dismissal of workers who take childcare leave. The measure was not in the government's original draft, but both the ruling and opposition parties made an amendment under which ministerial ordinances cover the issuance of certificates stating the period of childcare leave for those who apply for it.

As a result of the global economic downturn that started in the United States, the number of workers' inquiries received by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare this year is 1.4 times higher than last year. People have approached the ministry complaining that when they have taken childcare leave they have been forced to resign, been sacked, had temporary employment contracts suspended, suffered pay cuts or received unfavorable job transfers, and it is clear that the childcare leave system has yet to become accepted in Japanese society.

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The revision to the law on child-care and family-care leave is the starting point in promoting and establishing the foundations for the childcare leave system; but the issue does not end simply by producing a revised law. The most important things now are to change business owners' attitudes and promote understanding from employees' bosses and co-workers. We want to see a society in which it is natural for employees to return to the workplace after taking childcare leave.

- reprinted from the Mainichi Daily News

**Region:** Asia <sup>[2]</sup>

International <sup>[3]</sup>

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