

Japan urges more dads to swap desk for diapers ^[1]

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Japan's fathers spend less time on child care and housework than their counterparts in any other developed country.

But thanks to a new set of government initiatives that encourage working dads to take time off - part of a broader effort to boost Japan's rock-bottom birthrate - the number of fathers who swap their desks for diapers may be about to rise.

Under the revised Child-care and Family-care Leave Law, which takes effect on Wednesday, fathers will be allowed to take more time off to look after their children.

Employers will also be obliged to allow a shorter six-hour working day to staff with children under three years old and in some cases, fathers will be exempt from working overtime.

Masayuki Yamaguchi, a spokesman for Japan's labour ministry, said the initiative, which includes the launch of a self-help website, aims to help dads manage their work-life balance.

According to a Ministry survey, as many as a third of Japan's dads would like to take paternity leave.

But many of Japan's "salarymen," who are notorious for working gruelling hours, are afraid that taking time out as a stay-home dad could harm promotion prospects and damage relations with colleagues who have to cover for their absence.

Even at the ministry, leave-taking dads account for a mere 2.3 percent, far below the government's target of 13 percent by 2020, Yamaguchi said.

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One group trying to change Japan's dads' workaholic image is "Fathering Japan," a not-for-profit organisation aiming to promote understanding of stay-home dads.

"If a male worker announces that he is going to take paternity leave, people around him start to doubt his suitability for the job. There's a chance that they'll start thinking that he's planning to quit," said Tetsuyo Ando, who founded the organisation five years ago.

"So many male employees are worried about even talking about taking time off. We need a change in attitudes, and a change of environment in the work place."

And there are some signs of change.

A relatively new, and so far small, group of prominent stay-home dads who put their career on hold to look after their children have been making headlines.

Japan's so-called "Iku-men" - a play on the Japanese word for child-rearing, "iku-ji" - include the mayor of Tokyo's Bunkyo ward, Hironobu Narisawa, and Takeshi Tsurono, a high profile celebrity.

"I would wake up at 6 a.m. to make the kids' packed lunches and then see them off to school. I've seriously come to understand the difficulties my wife faced," Tsurono, 35, told reporters when he announced his plan.

"But I hope that society will change so that men can take leave too."

"I don't think that paternity leave is for everyone. But if a man wants to take time off to look after his child, it's important for there to be an environment where he can do so."

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