

Take off necktie, pick up baby ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Sado Horikawa made his "ikumen declaration" in June.

He now wakes up at 5:30am to do laundry, takes his 2-year-old son to nursery school and leaves the office at 5pm to pick the boy up.

Together with a revision of the law governing child care leave in June that strengthened the ability of men to take the leave, the health, labour and welfare ministry began its Ikumen Project to increase the number of men taking leave from the rock-bottom level as compared with European nations.

Ikumen is a recently coined word made up of 'iku', meaning "raise a child" in Japanese, and the English 'men', and describes fathers who actively participate in raising their children.

Horikawa, a 39-year-old employee of a Tokyo information system firm, used to come home late from work. But he chose to take child care leave from January to April 2008 after the birth of his second son. He was also prompted by his wife, who also works, asking him, "Can you imagine how hard it is being in charge of both housework and raising the kids?"

During his leave, Horikawa's wife returned to work. After that, he was as busy as a bee, feeding the baby every three hours, cleaning the house, washing clothes and cooking with the baby strapped to his back.

"I really felt how hard it'd been for my wife. I had fun, but that was probably because it was only three months," he said.

In mid-June, the ministry set up a Web site asking men to "declare themselves ikumen." The project aims to increase awareness of the issue. More than 400 declarations had been made by end of July.

A panel of seven experts delegated by the ministry, including a university professor and a head of a nonprofit organization that encourages men to participate in child care, select an "ikumen star" every month. The Web site also describes how some companies support employees with children.

The project is a response to the extremely low percentage of Japanese men who take child care leave: only 1.72 per cent in fiscal 2009 - far below the 89 per cent in Norway, 78 per cent in Sweden and 18 per cent in the Netherlands. Although comparisons should take into account the different systems in each country, the disparity is still huge.

The revised Child Care and Family Care Leave Law stipulates that if both parents take child care leave, an employee may take leave at any time until the child reaches 1 year and 2 months of age - two months longer than the period when only one parent takes leave. The revised law also allows a father who takes leave within eight weeks of the child being born to take leave again during the specified period.

According to a ministry survey, families with a father who spends four hours or more on housework and raising the child on non-workdays are three times more likely to have a second child. The ministry hopes that men taking child care leave will help raise the flagging birthrate, as well as help make best use of women's ability to work, both of which will revitalise society.

"Hopefully the law revision and the project will change the atmosphere at the workplace," said Masayuki Yamaguchi, a ministry official involved in the project who took a one-month child care leave last autumn. He said he realised after the leave how he used to only think about work.

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