

Working parents seek more flexible child care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Demand is growing for more flexible child care in Japan because of shifts in working styles and the rise of two-income families.

Hoshin Seiaien in Osaka is one of five child-care centers in Japan that provide round-the-clock child care.

"Demand for 24-hour child care is growing," said Kanako Kusaba, head of the Christian facility.

When it started 30 years ago, Hoshin Seiaien operated in just one location, offering 30 places for working parents, mainly single mothers working at night. After opening a second location nine years ago, it now has space for 110 children and is used more by career women than by single mothers, Ms. Kusaba said.

Several factors are behind the increase in demand. The decline of the extended family means parents can no longer count on relatives for support. A shift in the economy toward service jobs from manufacturing has created more work involving irregular hours. And Japan's aging society has increased the number of people who work in jobs caring for the elderly at night or on graveyard shifts.

Ms. Kusaba said the supply of spaces in extended-hours child care is limited by a shortage of caregivers who are willing to work night hours for relatively low pay. "Unfortunately wages aren't commensurate with the responsibilities the work demands," she said.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made a priority to get more women in the workplace and has proposed increasing the number of child-care slots.

Some think bringing in more foreign workers may be an answer.

Japan already allows a small number of expatriate executives to sponsor visas for foreign nannies and home helpers. Kathy Matsui, managing director at Goldman Sachs said Japanese mothers should be able to do the same.

Mr. Abe is considering relaxing restrictions on foreign domestic helpers in special economic zones his government may create as part of Mr. Abe's "third arrow" of structural changes to the economy.

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