

Risk-taking and resilience: lessons from Japanese kindergartens

1. ROUTINES



About the project

This case study is one of a series, following research into the role outdoor environments in Japanese kindergartens can play in developing risk-taking behaviours and emotional, intellectual and physical resilience.

Funded and supported by the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, Play Learning Life, Learning through Landscapes and Tsurumi Junior College, the research team visited 15 settings in and around Tokyo and Yokohama. Information and evidence was gathered through desk research, outdoor observations, discussions with children and adults and targeted online surveys for teachers, practitioners and designers. *Click on the logos to visit our websites.*

In addition to these case studies, our project conclusions can be accessed via online and face to face CPD seminars, aimed at designers, policy makers and those working in schools and kindergartens so that they too can learn from what is being achieved in Japan.



Case study: Routines

This case study looks at common kindergarten routines and the role they play in supporting risk-taking and the development of resilience in Japanese early years settings. Our focus was on the routines that enabled challenging play and learning outdoors.

There is no question that Japanese cultural norms shape routines, but much of what we observed could be adapted to work alongside early years pedagogies in the UK, and would certainly support perennial and universal curriculum themes such as self-reliance, taking responsibility, turn-taking and self-regulation.

Consistent, yet flexible and child-focused routines are just one of the many strands of practice that enable children to take risks and build resilience. In these Japanese settings, routines are unhurried, well resourced and shared equally between children and adults, projecting strong messages of trust and value. Working and playing together deepens bonds between adults and children, and these tangible connections build children's confidence and reinforce the freedom they have to choose how, where, when and with whom they play.

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Julie Mountain and Mary Jackson would like to express their sincere thanks to the children and adults who welcomed us so warmly to their schools and settings, and to Dr. Ko Senda and Ryuta Otsubo, researchers, interpreters, curators and outdoor play pedagogues. We simply wouldn't have had this incredible opportunity without you.

Routines – Footwear

Japan has a sub-tropical, temperate climate. Summers are hot, humid and rainy; winters are mild, with cool and occasional cold spells. Young children play out all year round in Japanese kindergartens, and footwear and clothing routines make this possible.

- Children and adults alike wear *uwabaki* – Japanese style slippers – when indoors, and trainers or sturdy shoes when outdoors.
- Children's *uwabaki* are supplied by parents, are washable and often have reinforced toes. They are simple slip on or elasticated slippers so that even the very youngest toddlers are able to take them on and off.
- Shoes and *uwabaki* are stored in purpose built units, immediately adjacent to classroom doors on external decking known as 'connecting' spaces.



Routines – Footwear

From the very youngest age, children are taught to remove their shoes on the decked 'connecting' spaces, and to place them in the appropriate storage unit. They exchange their shoes for *uwabaki*, which they don before entering the building.

- Children's outdoor shoes are generally pull on or velcro fastened. They are able to change footwear independently and – crucially - with no pressure to hurry.
- We watched children taking their time to change into outdoor shoes, using the task to observe other children at play and decide where to go next.
- Outdoor footwear was also removed to enter playhouses and outdoor classrooms; in most cases, children then simply wore their socks or went barefooted.
- Babies and older children were often seen outdoors with bare feet; every setting has external washing facilities where muddy or dusty feet can be independently cleaned.



Routines – Clothing

Some Japanese settings have a simple uniform; others do not. In all cases, children and adults are appropriately dressed for the weather, and for the outdoor activity.

- Wet and cold weather gear, wellington boots and umbrellas are easily accessible, and plentiful. Every child that wants to be outdoors in the rain, can be.
- Practitioners wear aprons or half-overalls, usually in a design of their own choice. In many settings, elegant Japanese style cross-back aprons were the norm; in others, practitioners used practical tabards. What they all had in common was large pockets!
- Children wear baseball or legionnaire style hats, often personalised with embroidered badges, whatever the weather. Because wearing a hat is an everyday routine, children don't need to be asked to wear one on hot days.
- Year groups / rooms wear matching coloured hats, so that practitioners can quickly identify their key children, wherever they might be outdoors. Children are able to roam freely outdoors, and some settings are very extensive, so the hat system is invaluable.



Routines – Hygiene and self-care

Cleanliness is an important aspect of Japanese culture, so hygiene routines are quickly instilled at kindergartens. In addition to *uwabaki* for indoors, every kindergarten has outdoor washing facilities, often in attractive mosaic styles, with shower attachments to allow dusty or muddy feet and bodies to be cleaned up.

- Children and adults wash their hands during and after playing outdoors; soap in string bags makes it easy to remember; they'll also rinse bare feet before shoes or *uwabaki* are put back on.
- Infection prevention face masks are not uncommon, especially in winter.
- Some kindergartens encourage teeth cleaning after mealtimes; often outdoors!
- In many settings, toilet facilities are unisex and open plan, with quick access from outdoors. *Uwabaki* are exchanged for plastic slip-ons, used only in washroom areas.



Routines – Managing outdoor play

Several of the settings we visited had very extensive grounds. Others made trips beyond the setting most days. Shared routines made it possible for children to enjoy roaming freely in even the largest outdoor settings, and make the most of trips to the forest or local park, without creating additional work or logistical headaches.

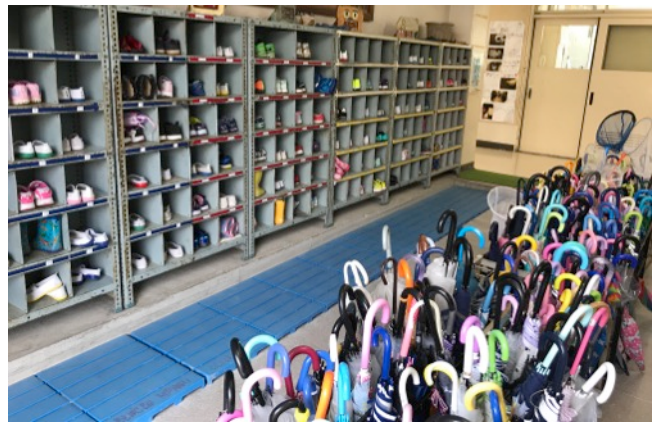
- Tidying up resources is a shared endeavor, and can take up to 20 minutes; there is no rush, no frantic activity and instead lots of to-and-fro conversations and physical effort. Children know exactly where each resource ‘lives’ and these spaces are fully accessible so children are purposeful and successful in their tasks.
- Children collect their own ‘going home’ kit – lunch bags, coats etc. – and place them on the decks or outdoor benches (which they themselves move into place).
- Parents drop their children off, and at the end of the day, meet them, outdoors; practitioners are there to welcome children and chat to parents. Each day starts and ends with outdoor play; by the time children move indoors, they’ve used up some of their ‘start of the day’ excitement in physically active play.
- Older children help set up snacks, the timing of which is flexible. Lunch timing is not sacrosanct; routines are never more important than a child’s in-the-moment needs.



Routines - Storage

Efficient, accessible storage supports smooth routines. Children can only participate in management routines (e.g. tidying up) if they can reach storage shelves or cubbies, and carry objects or containers without injury. The Japanese kindergartens made the most of every nook and cranny outdoors for clever storage:

- If items don't need to be stored, they aren't. They are left in situ ready for children to pick up where they left off, the next day.
- If a storage unit can be on wheels, it is, so that children can move it to the most convenient spot.
- In secure gardens, transparent netting is used to remove resources from use, or they are stacked on open shelves. We saw very few locked sheds.
- Clean up kits – long handled dustpans and brushes, cloths – are always available and usually stored in the play space itself.



Routines – Staying safe

Staying safe and safeguarding are just as important in Japanese settings as they are in the UK. However, with earthquakes, often major, a recurrent threat, staying safe takes on a critical new perspective.

- Children are taught how to respond to earthquakes with regular drills and we watched them evacuating the building quietly, quickly and sensibly.
- Slides and nets are common features in settings with more than one storey - these facilitate speedy exits.
- Children are often taken off-site. In addition to the expected paperwork and risk assessments carried out beforehand, settings have their own mini-buses and rather than rely on hi-vis vests, the children's coloured hats provide the necessary visibility to staff.
- Adults model safe behaviours, whether it's clasping hands over heads during earthquake drill, testing the depth of a stream before stepping in, or checking the strength of a branch before climbing on it.
- Children are encouraged to play with buddies, and whilst settings allow children to roam freely, their coloured hats and the high adult/child ratio means no child is out of sight AND out of earshot.
- The majority of practitioners are first aid trained, and they and the children's parents expect bumps and bruises as part of every day play. Children are extraordinarily resilient in the face of cuts, bruises or squashed fingers or toes.



Risk-taking + Resilience: routines

Putting it into practice

Key lessons from our study of risk-taking and resilience in Japanese kindergartens:

Adult role

- Adults have high expectations for children, and *share* responsibilities with them.
- Important routines are *taught* from the very youngest age. Babies and toddlers learn about changing shoes, washing hands, clearing up and emergency drills.
- Adults and older children display *role-modelling* behaviours, for example by showing younger children how to wash hands, clear away and change footwear.

Equipment

- Storage is *accessible* and open to children; only items unsuitable for independent use (e.g. woodworking tools) are stored out of reach.
- Loose parts are *plentiful* and stored in different places outdoors so that they are always ready to use, and easy to put away.

Footwear and clothing

- Simple *slippers* help keep the setting clean indoors and clearly differentiate between the types of activity that are appropriate indoors and outdoors. Learning to change in and out of shoes is a crucial element of kindergarten learning and the early investment of time pays dividends over a child's time at the setting.
- Settings have sufficient outdoor clothing for every child who wants to be outdoors, including wet weather gear and umbrellas.
- Children wear *coloured hats* or caps, identifying their class and key person and protecting from sun.

Management

- *Start and end the day* with outdoor play; children take responsibility for their bags and spend the first part of the day in shared, freely chosen play.
- Not all resources are packed away at the end of a session; clearing up is a shared activity, is *unrushed* and an opportunity for bonding and rich discussion.
- Children *help* set up snacks outdoors, and also clear up

Benefit Risk Assessment

- Staff know the outdoor space thoroughly and are able to dynamically risk assess activities, resources and features. They risk assess to *enable* risky, challenging play, not to prevent it.
- Adults know their key children's current abilities and next aspirations; a wide range of features and equipment provide *graduated risk-taking* opportunities, ensuring children have to try – sometimes repeatedly – in order to be successful at the most challenging activities.



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