

Gakudou-Hoiku

– School-Age Care –

in Japan



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Team Gakudou-Hoiku

Preface

We are a research team studying School-Age Care (SAC) in Japan. Our research goal is to improve the quality of SAC in Japan by investigating practices and conducting research on SAC worldwide. Over the past several years, we have interviewed researchers and practitioners of SAC in other countries. In the process, we have realized that SAC in Japan is not well known around the world. We therefore decided to create this brochure, written in English, to introduce SAC in Japan.

Child welfare and education systems, including SAC, vary greatly from country to country, as they are strongly influenced by each country's culture, traditions, and policies regarding family and child-rearing. For this reason, we are concerned about whether this brochure adequately conveys SAC in Japan. However, we hope that this brochure will inform the world about the current state of SAC in Japan and contribute to promoting joint research with researchers worldwide to improve the quality of SAC worldwide.

Finally, we would like to thank *Nakashima Gakudo-Hoiku Sho* for providing the photos for this brochure. We truly appreciate their cooperation.

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Terms

- *Gakudou-Hoiku* (School-Age Care in Japanese): Care for Elementary school-age children from grade 1 to 6, whose parents/guardians are not at home after school and during long vacations. In the following text, this will be abbreviated as 'SAC'.
- *Gakudou-Hoiku Sho* (School-Age Care Center in Japanese): Facility for School-Age Care. The government has named it 'After-School Children's Club.' In the following text, School-Age Care Center will be referred to as 'SAC Center,' but when quoting laws, regulations, or policy documents, it will be referred to as 'After-School Children's Club.'
- *Gakudou-Hoiku Shidoin* (School-Age Care (SAC) worker in Japanese): A person who takes care of children in SAC Center. This is not the name of the qualification. The Japanese qualification for SAC workers is named '*Houkago Jido Shienin* (After-school care support worker)'.

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Introduction: The Current State of School-Age Care (SAC) in Japan

What is a safe and relieved environment for children to spend time in after school and during school holidays? In Japan, the development of SAC has become a major social issue. In a 2017 survey¹⁾ of approximately 25,000 first graders, 70.0% reported spending their after-school time at home. 38.6% mentioned attending SAC Centers, while 31.0% stated participating in various lessons, sports clubs, tutoring schools, etc. Furthermore, 26.4% reported spending time outdoors, such as in parks, and 16.4% at friends' houses (multiple answers were allowed). The survey showed that the proportion of children born in 2010 who attended SAC Centers was higher than that of children born in 2001. Additionally, the survey revealed that 67.2% of mothers were employed, indicating that half of the children with working mothers were in SAC Centers.

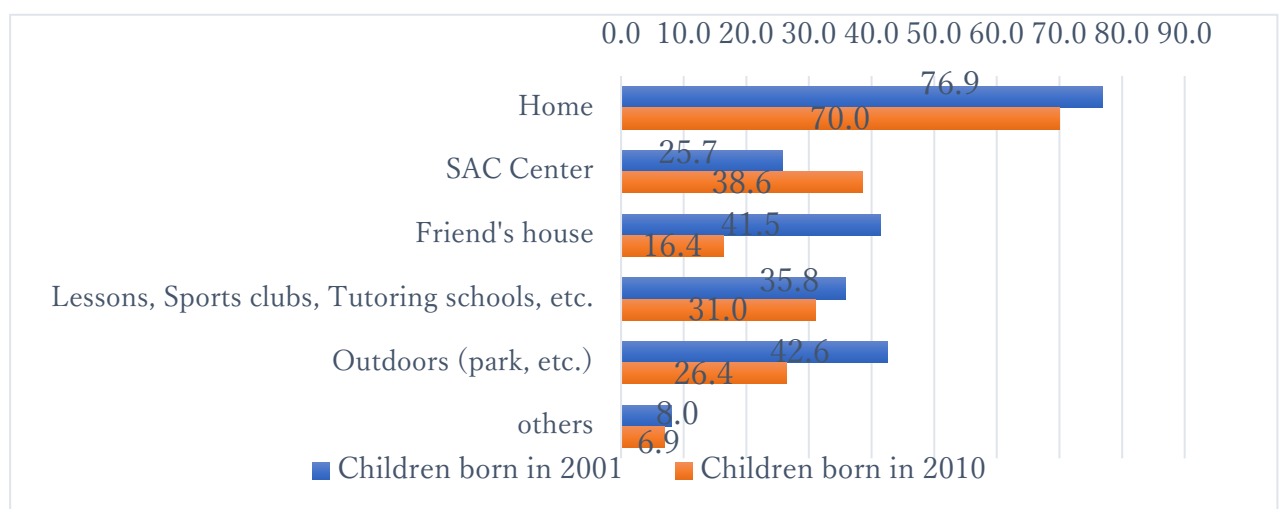


Figure 1: Intergenerational comparison of places to spend time after school (multiple answers)

In 2023, 1,457,384 children in grades 1 to 6 were registered as users of SAC Centers. The percentages of children in each grade to the total number of children were 46.2% for first graders, 40.7% for second graders, 31.0% for third graders, 16.7% for fourth graders, 8.1% for fifth graders, and 4.1% for sixth graders²⁾.

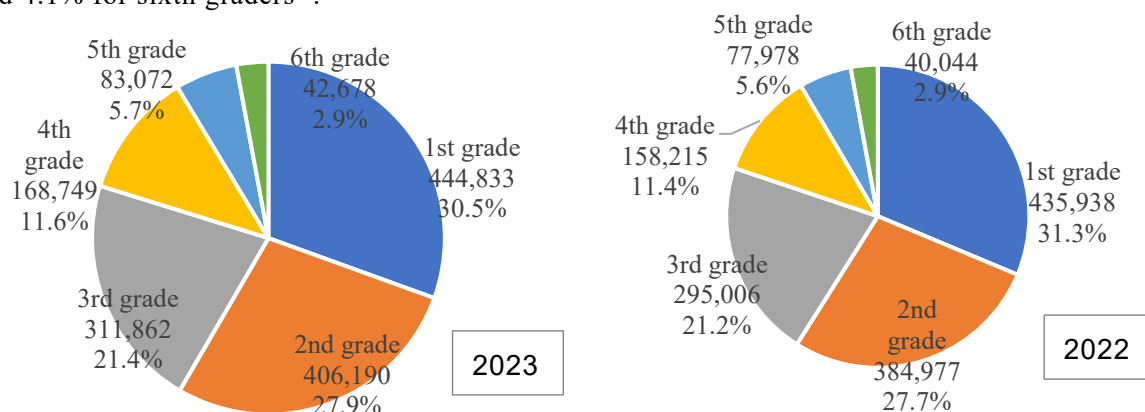


Figure 2: Number of registered children by grade level

As Figure 3 shows, the number of SAC Centers and the number of children registered as users have been increasing each year. In 2015, a measure was implemented to require each support unit to be divided when the number of children exceeds 40. For this reason, the number of units continues to increase. Even so, the number of children on the waiting list has exceeded 15,000 in recent years because there were not enough SAC Centers available.

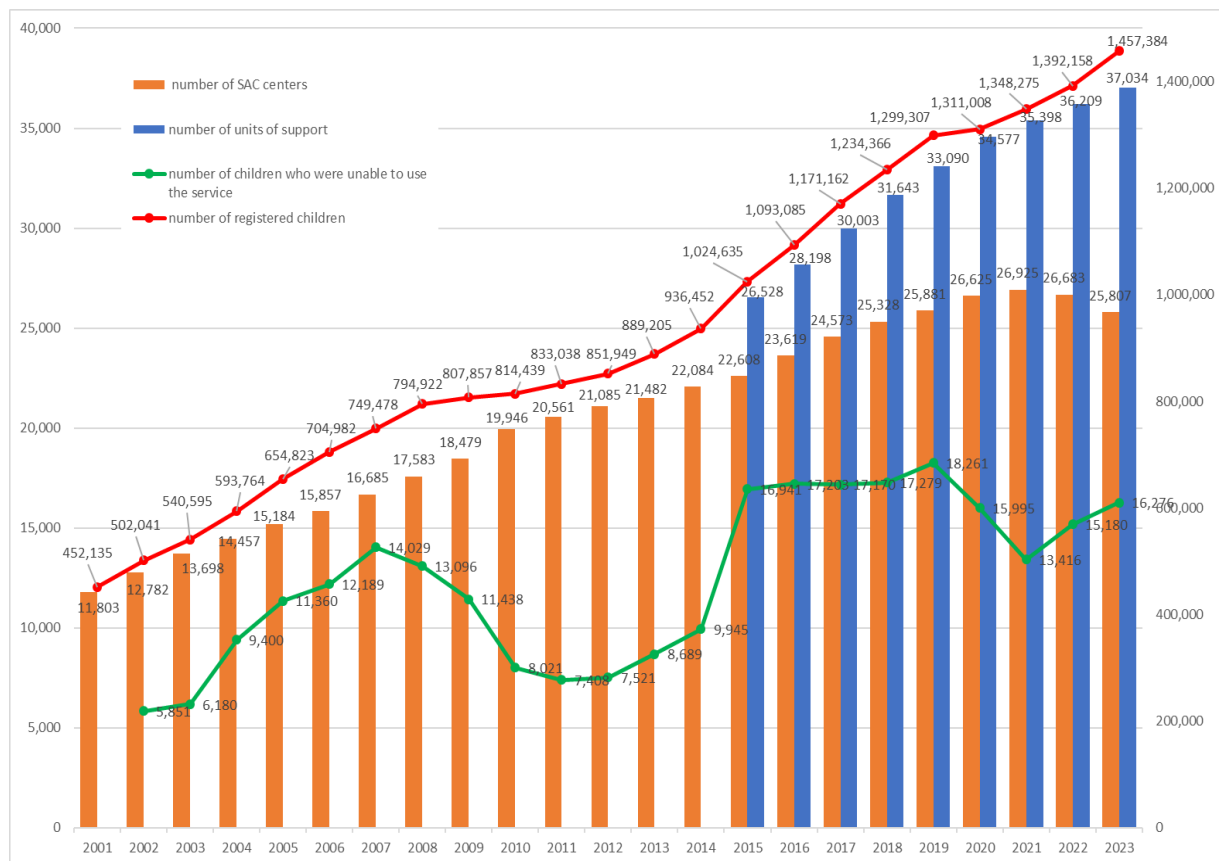


Figure 3: Changes in the number of SAC Centers, number of units of support, number of registered children, and number of children who were unable to use the service

Thus, SAC Centers continue to increase in number. However, along with this increase, disparities widened with respect to the quality of facilities, equipment, staff, and activities. Therefore, the government established equipment and operating standards in 2015 to improve and standardize the quality of SAC Centers. Based on these standards, each municipality is responsible for promoting SAC programs.

What follows is a discussion of how Japanese SAC Centers came to be.

1. Historical Development of School-Age Care (SAC) in Japan³⁾

(1) SAC before World War II

Before World War II, SAC were implemented in Japan as part of “settlement movement^{*}” and welfare projects for single mother families. It was not until the 1940s that such activities became independent projects for after-school care nationwide. Entering the period when all resources were mobilized for the war, fathers were conscripted as soldiers, while mothers were assigned to factory work as the nation sought to boost production. This is how the need for SAC began to be recognized. Around 1943, SAC Centers began to be built within the premises of schools nationwide. However, the war ended soon afterwards.

(2) Immediately after World War II to the early 1960s

After the war ended, the Wartime SAC Centers were discontinued. *Imagawa Gakuen* Nursery in Osaka City was the first to implement SAC after the war. *Imagawa Gakuen* Nursery provided SAC for children who had nowhere to go after school, such as war orphans. It used the director's office as a space for children to spend time. In 1949, the Child Welfare Act was revised for the third time to allow nurseries to admit school-age children. In response, *Imagawa Gakuen* Nursery officially began to start SAC with dedicated workers at dedicated rooms.

Since the mid-1950s, the number of nurseries and *Jidoukan*^{**} (Playing halls for children) providing SAC, similar to *Imagawa Gakuen* Nursery, had increased in Osaka City. In February 1968, there were 16 SAC Centers. Similar efforts were made in Tokyo in the mid-1950s. Parents/guardians jointly launched SAC Centers for school-age children who had outgrown nurseries. However, these efforts at nurseries and *Jidoukan* did not last long.

In 1958, the *Toshima* Children's Club, which aimed to provide continuous services, was a success. Learning from this experience, the number of SAC Centers jointly run by parents increased. As a result, the number of SAC Centers jointly run by parents/guardians who had learned from that experience increased. In 1962, operators, parents/guardians of such SAC Centers in Tokyo established *Gakudou Hoiku Renraku Kyogikai* (SAC liaison council).



* The ‘settlement movement’ was a social work initiative that began in the UK at the end of the 19th century, in which religious leaders and academics lived in poor areas of cities and provided assistance to residents in all aspects of their lives, including education, childcare, employment, and medical care.

** *Jidoukan* (Playing halls for children) is a child welfare facility for all children in the community, providing them with sound play and promoting their sound development. It has been established in about 4,000 locations throughout Japan.

(3) Early 1960s to the 1980s

In the mid-1960s, there emerged many children whose parents/guardians worked and who were not cared for by adults after school. Such children were called ‘*Kagikko* (latchkey kids)’, and their increase became a social concern. The Ministry of Health and Welfare (which became the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare in 2001) in 1963 began to promote the establishment of *Jidoukan* to address this problem. The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture (which became Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2001) in 1966 also began *Rusukatei Jidokai Ikusei Jigyo* (the project to foster associations for children whose parents/guardians are not home after school). The project was implemented at 422 locations in 148 municipalities nationwide at its peak in 1968. However, the ministry discontinued the project in March 1970 and instead implemented *Koutei Kaihou Jigyo* (the project to open school grounds after school). The project simply provided school grounds as a safe place for all children to play after school. This government action was faced with opposition from *Zenkoku Gakudou Hoiku Renraku Kyogikai* (the nationwide SAC liaison council). The group, whose name was changed in 1972 from *Gakudou Hoiku Renraku Kyogikai*, advocated for the institutionalization of SAC.

In 1973, *Zenkoku Gakudou Hoiku Renraku Kyogikai* filed the first petition to parliament calling for the establishment of a system of SAC. This matter was deliberated in parliament, with the result that the government in 1976 began to implement *Toshi Jido Kenzen Ikusei Jigyo* (the project to promote the sound upbringing of urban children). This project aimed to address the problem of children whose parents/guardians are not home after school and the shortage of playgrounds in urban areas. However, this was not a legally mandated project. It was positioned as a transitional measure to be in place until *Jidoukan* facilities were established in various places of the country. Another limitation of this project was that those who would protect and guide children were volunteers, not paid workers. For this reason, *Zenkoku Gakudou Hoiku Renraku Kyogikai* continued to ask the government to make improvements to this project. Nevertheless, the government did not take any action until the end of the 1980s.



(4) From the 1990s: Implementation of the project to take measures for children after school to institutionalization of SAC

In the 1990s, the government changed its policies on SAC. In 1989, the nation's total fertility rate fell below 1.57, the previous post-war low. Consequently, the government implemented measures to institutionalize SAC, aiming to help people balance work and child-rearing responsibilities in response to the declining birthrate. In 1991, the government abolished *Toshi Jidou Kenzen Ikusei Jigyo* (the project to promote the sound upbringing of urban children) and launched *Houkago Jidou*

Taisaku Jigyo (the project to support children after school). This project was not a transitional project that would be implemented until *Jidoukan* were established across the country. The project involved the hiring of paid employees. Around that time, an advisory panel to the child and family bureau of the Ministry of Health and Welfare proposed the legal institutionalization of SAC services. In response, the ministry began to consider enabling legislation in 1993.

In 1997, the parliament deliberated a revision to the Child Welfare Act. The revised law stipulates *Houkago Jidou Kenzenikusei Jigyo* (the services for the sound upbringing of after-school children). As a result, *Houkago Jidou Taisaku Jigyo* (the project to support children after school) was abolished in 1998, and SAC was implemented as *Houkago Jidou Kenzenikusei Jigyo* in accordance with the law.

(5) Increase in the number of SAC Centers and efforts to improve their quality

SAC services were instituted by law, the number of SAC Centers and users continued to rise, as shown in the figure 3. However, it led to increased disparities among these Centers in terms of the quality of facilities and equipment, workers' credentials and expertise, and the content of activities, as there were no government standards regarding these issues.

In 2014, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare issued an ordinance regarding the “Standards concerning the facilities and operations of services for the sound upbringing of after-school children”⁴⁾. This ordinance, implemented in April 2015, established national standards for facilities and equipment, staffing and credentials, and the operation of SAC Centers nationwide. Based on these standards, municipalities have enacted ordinances establishing minimum standards for SAC



Centers under their jurisdiction. Moreover, in 2015, the Ministry created the “Guidelines for the Operation of After-School Children's Club”⁵⁾, regarding the management of SAC Centers and support for children. These guidelines were not legally binding. Therefore, in 2016, the Ministry released the “Commentary on the guidelines for the operation of After-School Children's Club”,⁶⁾ to improve the quality of SAC and standardize SAC services nationwide.

In recent years, the employment rate of mothers has risen due to the economic downturn and stagnant wages in Japan. Consequently, the demand for SAC Centers has increased, leading to a growing number of children on waiting lists. As of 2023, the number of children on these waiting lists has reached 16,276. The government aims to address this issue by opening more SAC Centers that utilize local school facilities and volunteers⁷⁾. However, there are still many children waiting for access to these services.

2. Purpose and Role of School-Age Care (SAC) in Japan

(1) Purpose of SAC in Japan

“Standards concerning the facilities and operations of services for the sound upbringing of after-school children” specifies the purpose of SAC in article 5, paragraph 1. It states that the purpose should be “to pursue the sound upbringing of elementary school-age children whose guardians are absent from home during daytime hours due to work, etc., by helping the children improve their autonomy, social skills, and creativity and establish essential lifestyle habits in cooperation with their families and local communities so that they can play and live autonomously according to their stage of development”.

(2) The Role of SAC in Japan

To realize this purpose, SAC Centers have been established. “Guidelines for the operation of School-Age Care Center” describe the role of SAC in Chapter 1 Section 2. It states that the roles are below; “To promote support for sound upbringing in view of the best interests of children”, “To support for sound upbringing in cooperation with the school, various social resources in the local community and guardians" and "To support guardians in raising children”. In other words, SAC not only promotes the sound upbringing of children, but also plays a role in building networks with parents/guardians, schools, and local community organizations.



3. National Standards for School-Age Care (SAC) Services

“Standards concerning the facilities and operations of services for the sound upbringing of after-school children” implemented in 2015, was the first national standards issued in Japan regarding SAC services. Details of the standards are as follows:

- Facility (Physical Environment)

The dedicated area shall be set up as a room or space that functions as a place for play and living, as well as a place for relaxation. The area of the dedicated area must be approximately 1.65 square meters or more for each child.

- Staffing

Each unit must have at least two ‘*Houkago Jido Shienin* (After-school care support workers)’; however, all but one can be replaced by uncertified workers.

- Group size of children

The number of children in one unit shall be approximately 40 or less.

- Operating days

In principle, 250 days or more per year

- Operating hours

On days when school classes are not in session, the facility will be open for at least eight hours a day, and on days when school classes are in session, it will be open for at least three hours a day

- Other operational standards

This includes measures against emergency disasters, principles of equal treatment of children, child abuse prevention, hygiene management, confidentiality, communication with parents/guardians, collaboration with related organizations, and response in the event of accidents.

Based on these national standards, each municipality has formulated an ordinance that outlines minimum standards. Each SAC Center is operated by this ordinance.



4. Current Status of the Operations of SAC Centers (2023)

(1) Establishing and operating bodies

Half of SAC Centers are established by municipalities, and the actual management is handled by social welfare corporations and organizations formed by parents and residents. The number of public-operate SAC Centers is decreasing.

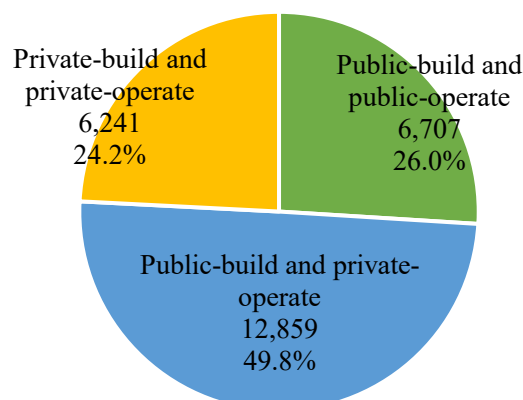


Figure 4: Status of implementation by establishment/operation bodies (2023)

(2) Establishment locations

Historically, SAC Centers have been established by a variety of organizations within diverse policy contexts. For this reason, SAC Centers now exist in a variety of locations. The most common pattern is using vacant rooms in elementary schools (27.3%). This is because the number of vacant classrooms has been increasing in recent years due to the declining birthrate, and furthermore, the government is promoting the use of vacant classrooms as SAC Centers. 24.5% of SAC Centers use dedicated buildings located on school grounds. Thus, more than half of SAC Centers are operated within elementary school premises.

In recent years, SAC Centers have been operated in rented private houses or in nurseries for infants and toddlers.

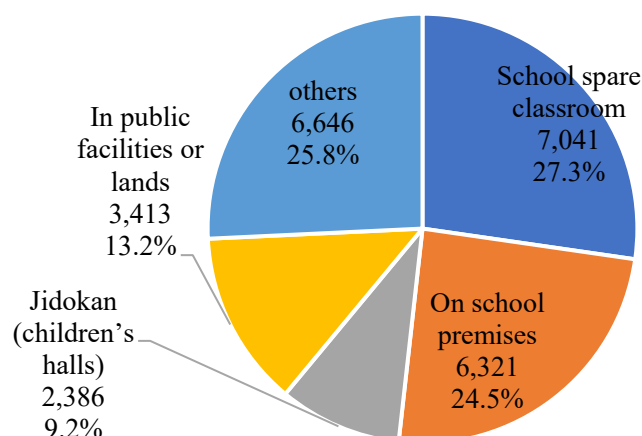


Figure 5: Status of installation location (2023)

(3) Closing time (weekdays)

Many SAC Centers open at 13:00 or thereafter and close between 18:31 and 19:00. The government is requesting them to extend operating hours by providing subsidies to those that stay open after 18:31.

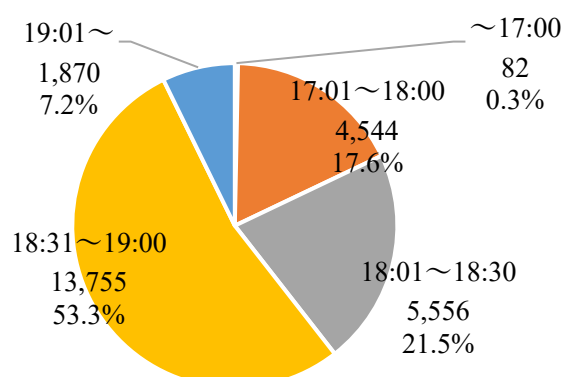


Figure 6: Status of end time (2023)

(4) Operations on school holidays

Most SAC Centers are open on Saturday (90.3%), Sunday (4.0%) and holidays (97.8%). About 90% of these Centers are open on Saturdays, but this number decreased slightly during the COVID-19 crisis.

Table 1: Opening status on Saturdays, Sundays, long holidays, etc.

Opening status	2023	2022	increase/decrease
Saturday	23,315 (90.3%)	23,845 (89.4%)	▲ 530
Sunday	1,025 (4.0%)	1,057 (4.0%)	▲ 32
Holidays	26,238 (97.8%)	26,015 (97.5%)	▲ 777

(5) Number of children with disabilities registered by grade level

At least 50,000 children with special needs or disabilities, including those with developmental disabilities, use SAC Centers nationwide. Additionally, 42.8% of SAC Centers provide care for such children. Moreover, SAC workers are required to attend training related to the care of such children.

Table 2: Number of registered children with disabilities by grade

Grade	2023	2022	increase/decrease
1 st	14,559 (24.4%)	13,428 (25.0%)	1,131
2 nd	15,273 (25.6%)	13,626 (25.3%)	1,647
3 rd	13,048 (21.9%)	11,576 (21.5%)	1,472
4 th	8,624 (14.5%)	7,686 (14.3%)	938
5 th	5,118 (8.6%)	4,630 (8.6%)	488
6 th	3,038 (5.1%)	2,867 (5.3%)	171
Total	59,660 (100.0%)	53,813 (100.0%)	5,847

(6) Number of workers by employment status

There are 192,144 people working at SAC Centers nationwide. This indicates that there is an average of five SAC workers in each support unit. Of these workers, 107,748 (56.1%) are *Hokago Jido Shieniin* (After-school care support workers). Each SAC Center must be staffed with at least one worker with this certification. However, only half of these workers (49.6%) are employed full-time, with the majority being unqualified and working part-time.

Table 3: Number of SAC workers by employment type

	2023	2022	increase/decrease
After-school care support workers	107,748 (56.1%)	102,677 (56.2%)	5,071
Full-time workers	53,440 (27.8%)	51,539 (28.2%)	1,901
Other than full-time workers	54,308 (28.3%)	51,138 (28.0%)	3,170
Assistant workers	80,974 (42.1%)	76,372 (41.8%)	4,602
Full-time workers	10,160 (5.3%)	9,949 (5.4%)	211
Other than full-time workers	70,814 (36.9%)	66,423 (36.4%)	4,391
Workers outside of care	3,422 (1.8%)	3,528 (1.9%)	▲ 106
Full-time workers	639 (0.3%)	789 (0.4%)	▲ 150
Other than full-time workers	2,783 (1.4%)	2,739 (1.5%)	44
Full-time workers total	64,239 (33.4%)	62,277 (34.1%)	1,962
Other than full-time workers total	127,905 (66.6%)	120,300 (65.9%)	7,605
grand total	192,144 (100.0%)	182,577 (100.0%)	9,567

(7) Monthly usage fee

Most SAC Centers charge fees (96.8%), but some SAC Centers offer free SAC, with a small number of such Centers available. Additionally, 88.5% of SAC Centers provide fee reductions or exemptions based on household income. Most SAC Centers charge about 5,000 yen (\$32.00/USD) per month. However, 16% of SAC Centers charge more than 10,000 yen. The fees are set by each SAC Center or municipality. Additionally, the cost of afternoon snacks, which is about 2,000 to 3,000 yen (actual spending), is added separately per month.

Table 4: Number of SAC workers by employment type

Monthly usage fee	2023	2022	increase/decrease
~2,000	357 (1.4%)	372 (1.4%)	▲ 15
2,000~4,000	4,014 (16.1%)	4,247 (16.5%)	▲ 233
4,000~6,000	6,982 (27.9%)	7,093 (27.5%)	▲ 111
6,000~8,000	5,105 (20.4%)	5,398 (20.9%)	▲ 293
8,000~10,000	4,046 (16.2%)	3,958 (15.3%)	88
10,000~12,000	1,986 (7.9%)	2,077 (8.0%)	▲ 91
12,000~14,000	872 (3.5%)	780 (3.0%)	92
14,000~16,000	446 (1.8%)	478 (1.9%)	▲ 32
16,000~18,000	219 (0.9%)	225 (0.9%)	▲ 6
18,000~20,000	190 (0.8%)	167 (0.6%)	23
20,000~	306 (1.2%)	281 (1.1%)	25
Snack fee only	464 (1.9%)	734 (2.8%)	▲ 270
Grand total	24,987 (100.0%)	24,987 (100.0%)	▲ 823

5. Contents of School-Age Care (SAC) in Japan

(1) Contents of SAC in “Guidelines for the operation of After-School Children's Club”

Chapter 3 of “Guidelines for the operation of After-School Children's Club” specifies the contents of support that should be provided at SAC Centers. It states that, based on the premise that SAC Centers are a safe place where children can spend their time, and that SAC workers are reliable and trustworthy individuals, SAC Centers should address the following:

1.Support children so that they can continue to attend SAC Centers proactively

To achieve this, SAC workers should support children so that they understand the necessity of attending the Centers. And SAC workers should communicate with parents/guardians about their children's mental and physical condition each other, collaborate with schools regarding the children's attendance. and seek support from neighbors and communities to understand and cooperate regarding the children's play and living environment and their safe trip home.

2. Keep track of children's attendance or absence, understand their mental and physical condition, and provide appropriate support

To achieve this, SAC workers should confirm in advance the attendance of children with their parents/guardians. If a child is absent or tardy without notice, SAC worker must promptly assess the situation and take appropriate action.

Upon the children's arrival, SAC workers warmly welcome them in a manner that makes them feel at home and check on each child's physical and mental condition. Additionally, they need to supervise the children's physical and mental condition while playing and in their daily activities and respond if they need rest or refreshment.

3.Enable children to plan and spend time autonomously

To achieve this, SAC workers encourage all children to create applicable time segments, use them flexibly to assist them in managing their time after school and communicate this approach to parents/guardians for their understanding.

4.Enable children to develop essential lifestyle habits needed for daily life through the life of SAC Centers

To achieve this, SAC workers assist children in developing important daily habits, such as hand washing, gargling, keeping their belongings organized, and changing clothes for various activities. They also help children learn about teamwork, sharing responsibilities, and understanding the rules required for living in a group.

5.Enable children to play and live autonomously according to their developmental stages

To achieve this, SAC workers need to support children to enable them of different ages to cooperate

with one another to maintain their lives at the Centers, and also support children to create peer relationships while playing spontaneously. When a conflict or fight occurs during play or daily life, SAC workers support children to recognize the differences in their thinking, adjust to their conflict, and calm their emotions. Also, they must prevent bullying and address such issues at an early stage. Furthermore, they are essential for creating an environment where children can independently work on their homework or self-study and provide necessary assistance. They also need to create opportunities for children at the Centers to play and engage in activities together with children in the local community.

6.Support children to express their feelings and opinions so that they can proactively involve themselves in the life of SAC Centers

To achieve this, SAC workers consider the children's emotional condition and their relationships with other children, respect the children's opinions, and build trusting relationships with them so that they can easily discuss their problems or worries. For various activities, such as special events, SAC workers reflect children's opinions from the planning stages and create ways for individual children in different development stages to involve themselves in the operation of such events proactively.

7.Provide appropriate snacks that meet the nutritional and energy needs of children during after-school hours

To achieve this, SAC workers provide appropriate snacks for children during their developmental stages. They also consider safety and hygiene and ensure that children enjoy their snacks in a relaxed atmosphere. For children with food allergies, the providers communicate closely with their parents/guardians in advance regarding matters of concern and measures to be taken in an emergency and safely provide food.

8. Maintain a safe environment for children and prepare them to respond appropriately to emergencies

To achieve this, SAC workers inspect the safety of the play and living environments to ensure that children are not exposed to any potential dangers they cannot avoid on their own. They also support children to develop self-management skills related to safety so that they can minimize harm if they encounter an accident or any other risky situation. Moreover, they must develop response policies and conduct regular evacuation drills to ensure the safety of children in the event of an accident, injury, disaster, and so on.

9.Inform parents/guardians regularly on their children's behaviors and general conditions at SAC Centers and provide nurturing support in cooperation with families

To achieve this, SAC Centers regularly inform parents/guardians of their children's behaviors and general conditions and share information on the children with their families so that they can balance their child-rearing responsibilities and work with feeling safe and reliable.

SAC Centers have a responsibility to make efforts to accommodate all children with special needs or disabilities. This includes providing an appropriate environment to ensure children with disabilities can use the facilities safely. The goal is to create an inclusive environment where all children grow together and have equal rights to live in their local community. On this account, SAC Centers document the situation and support provided for each child with a disability. They conduct case studies on support for such children, learn about disabilities through training, and create a system that allows for consultation in collaboration with local specialized organizations related to children with disabilities in order to improve support based on the characteristics of children with special needs or disabilities.

(2) Children's play and life at SAC Center: Case study; A day at X SAC Center in Okayama City

What follows is a description of how children play and engage in various activities at X SAC Center in Okayama City to provide an idea of how children spend their time at such facilities:

1. 14:00-15:00: Arrival

When school is over, children come to the Center saying, "Tadaima!" ("I'm back!" in Japanese). Some say it in a loud, energetic voice, while others say it in a weak, tired voice. SAC workers welcome the children, saying "Okaeri!" ("Welcome back!" in Japanese). They check the children's attendance and assess their physical and emotional conditions, asking, "What's wrong?", "What happened?" or "So, you are not with (so and so) today."

The children take out a communication notebook (a notebook used by SAC workers to communicate with parents/guardians) from their bag and turn it in. They then put their bags and other belongings in lockers. Some children change into clothes that make it easier for them to exercise. SAC workers read the communication notebook and check the messages from the parents/guardians. Some parents/guardians write that they will pick up their children earlier than usual, at 17:00.

2. 15:30: Free time (including the time for homework)

The children decide for themselves what their first activity should be at the Center. For children who have homework, the goal is to finish it by 3:30 p.m. Typically, most children complete their homework before they play. When someone is doing homework, other children must play quietly. Once they finish their homework, the children play with anything they like. Popular outdoor plays include sports such as soccer and dodgeball, as well as tag games such as 'cops and robbers' and freeze tag. Children also walk on stilts, ride unicycles, and catch insects. Indoor plays include playing with *koma* (spinning tops in Japanese) and *kendama* (cup-and-ball toys in Japanese), board games, and card games. They also draw pictures and play with Lego.

The SAC workers observe the children, speak to them as necessary, play with them, and supervise them. They also create an attractive environment for children to play autonomously and show them that SAC workers are having fun, creating a positive atmosphere if needed. When problems arise while playing, such as children fighting over balls or equipment, they support the children to solve the problem independently.

3. 15:30-16:00: Snack time

The children eat snacks together and clean up afterwards. At 15:30, all children stop playing and comes inside. Children are grouped according to their age. These groups work together to set up tables and chairs and distribute the food. The menu is based on what the children want. Popular snacks include baumkuchen and donuts. Cookies, chocolate, and ice cream are also their favorites.

4. 16:00-17:30: Free time

After the snack is cleaned up, it is time for free play indoors and outdoors. During this time, the children independently plan and implement monthly birthday parties and various other events. SAC workers observe the children, speak to them when needed, play with them, and supervise their activities.

5. 17:30-18:00: Closing session

At 17:30, the children clean up their toys, games, sports equipment, and tools and gather indoors. Then, they reflect on how they played and what was fun and check the schedule for future activities. After that, they receive their communication notebooks back.

6. 18:00-19:00: Playing indoors/ Going home

The children play indoors after 18:00. The children go home in the order that their parents/guardians arrive to pick them up. The SAC worker communicate with them about how their children were doing that day and any other necessary information.

The Center closes at 19:00.



6. Qualifications and in-service training to work at SAC in Japan

(1) Qualifications for SAC workers

Specific credentials are not required to work at SAC Centers. But from April 2015, it has been mandatory for each support unit to have at least one *Houkago Jido Shienin* which is certification of SAC workers. This certification can be obtained by those who hold the basic qualifications listed below and complete a total of 24 hours of training in 16 subjects.

1) Nursery teacher, 2) Certified social worker, 3) High school graduate who has been engaged in child welfare services for at least two years, 4) School teacher: Kindergarten, Elementary school, Junior high school, High school, Special needs school, and so on, 5) University graduate in the fields of social welfare, psychology, education, sociology, art, or physical education, 6) Graduate school student in the fields of social welfare, psychology, education, sociology, art, or physical education, 7) Person who has a graduate degree in social welfare, psychology, education, sociology, art, or physical education, 8) Graduate of a university outside Japan in the fields of social welfare, psychology, education, sociology, art, and physical education, 9) Person who has graduated from high school and has been engaged in work similar to the services for sound upbringing of After-school children for at least two years, and 10) Person who has been engaged in the services for sound upbringing of after-school children for at least five years.

The most common basic qualifications for those who have obtained qualification is “3) High school graduate who has been engaged in child welfare services for at least two years.” This is followed by “1) Nursery teacher,” “4) School teacher”, and “9) Person who has graduated from high school and has been engaged in work similar to the services for sound upbringing of after-school children for at least two years.” These people comprise at least 90% of all certified SAC workers.

The training program required for this certification consists of the following 16 subjects:



1. Understanding of *Houkago Jidou Kenzenikusei Jigyo* (the services for the sound upbringing of after-school children) (After-School Children's Clubs) [4.5 hours]
 - ① The purpose and details of the services for the sound upbringing of after-school children
 - ② The general principles and rights protection regarding the services for the sound upbringing of after-school children
 - ③ Child and family welfare policies and After-School Children's Clubs
2. Basic knowledge for understanding children [6 hours]
 - ④ Understanding the development of children
 - ⑤ Life and development during childhood (6-12 years old)
 - ⑥ Understanding children with disabilities
 - ⑦ Understanding children needing special consideration
3. Support for the sound upbringing at After-School Children's Clubs [4.5 hours]
 - ⑧ Support for the sound upbringing of children attending After-School Children's Clubs
 - ⑨ Understanding and supporting children's play
 - ⑩ Support for the sound upbringing of children with disabilities
4. Cooperation and collaboration with parents/guardians, schools, and local communities at After-School Children's Clubs [3 hours]
 - ⑪ Cooperation, collaboration and consultation with parents/guardians
 - ⑫ Cooperation with schools and local communities
5. Safety and security at After-School Children's Clubs [3 hours]
 - ⑬ Measures related to children's daily life
 - ⑭ Safety measures and emergency response
6. Role and function expected of after-school care support workers [3 hours]
 - ⑮ Tasks of *Houkago Jido Shienin* (after-school care support worker)
 - ⑯ Operations and management of after-school children's clubs and legal compliance

Out of the 192,144 workers employed at SAC Centers across the country, only 36,818 are certified. However, there are 37,034 support units, which means there is less than one certified worker per unit, even though the ordinance requires there to be at least one certified worker.

Due to a shortage of certified SAC workers, the government eased certification requirements and job-placement criteria at the start of 2020. For instance, individuals with basic qualifications can now be considered certified SAC workers even if they have not completed the training program. However, there is still a shortage of both certified and uncertified workers. There are many reasons for this shortage. One reason is that Japan does not have a mechanism to train SAC workers at universities or vocational schools. Some universities have original training programs for SAC workers, but the number of such institutions is low⁸⁾.

(2) In-service training systems for current SAC workers

There is no mandatory training for current SAC workers. However, many SAC workers voluntarily undertake self-improvement to develop their professional skills. There are two ways for SAC workers to improve their professional skills.

1. Participate in training provided by municipalities

The government has allocated a budget for the training program aimed at the professional development of SAC workers. This initiative seeks to assist prefectures and municipalities in enhancing the expertise of their SAC workers.

The government requests that when prefectures utilize this budget for training, the focus should be on addressing issues related to managing SAC Centers and improving the content and methods commonly encountered in SAC services. Such themes may include, for example, “support for children who require special consideration, such as those with developmental disabilities,” “understanding children’s development,” “children’s human rights and professional ethics,” “handling of personal information and privacy protection,” and “cooperation with parents/guardians and their supports.”

The government requests that when municipalities implement training using this budget, they conduct training to acquire more basic knowledge about the operation of SAC Centers and the contents and methods of SAC and to learn practical techniques using concrete examples. Training in the following topics is required, for example: “first-aid measures and first-aid response training,” “fire-prevention, disaster-prevention, and crime-prevention planning and response,” “accident and injury prevention and response,” “understanding and dealing with allergies,” “response to anaphylaxis”, “creative snack preparation and hygiene and safety when serving”, and “play, art and craft, and expressive activities”.

Such training is provided by prefectural governments nationwide, but training by municipalities is still rare.

2. Voluntary training by workers and training opportunities provided by private organizations

In addition to the training conducted by the public sector, voluntary training is offered by individual SAC workers, individual SAC Centers, and networks of workers. Article 8 of the “Standards concerning the facilities and operations of services for the sound upbringing of



after-school children” states that individual workers must “always strive for self-improvement, endeavor to acquire, maintain, and improve the knowledge and skills necessary for the sound upbringing of children.” Thus, individual workers are required not only to attend training provided by the public sector but also to continue to learn on a daily basis.

It also states that each SAC providers must provide opportunities for employees to improve their qualifications. This means that SAC Centers should allow workers to participate in external training or develop and implement their own in-service training programs. The “Guidelines for the operation of After-School Children’s Clubs” states that one of the duties of SAC workers is to share

information and review case studies in the workplace to enhance and improve nurturing support. As a result, workers receive training at approximately 90% of SAC Centers.

A variety of networking organizations have been established among SAC Centers or among SAC workers to create opportunities for members to study. For example, *Zenkoku gakudou hoiku renraku kyogikai* (the nationwide SAC liaison council) holds study meetings in various parts of the country. In addition, a nationwide study meeting with more than 4,000 participants is held annually, with topics such as “child development,” “family support,” “staff meetings,” “SAC for older children,” “children's rights,” “care for children with disabilities,” “group building,” and “play in SAC.

Nippon Houkago Jido Shidojin Kyokai (Japan Association for After-school Child Care-workers), a nonprofit organization, created Japan’s first private qualifications system for SAC workers in 2009. Currently, it certifies its own qualification, which is made for those who have obtained the *Houkago Jido Shienin* (after-school care support worker). Over 1,000 workers have obtained this qualification. Workers with this qualification can register as members and continue to take follow-up training sessions.

3. Participation in training programs

In 2023, 8.0% of SAC workers did not receive the training sessions at all, and 57.8% of workers have received training 1 to 4 times. 15.5% of workers participated in 10 times or more, an increase from the previous year.

Table 5: Number of training sessions per SAC workers

Number of training sessions per worker	2023	2022	Increase/Decrease
0	2,070 (8.0%)	2,857 (10.7%)	▲ 787
1～4	14,923 (57.8%)	15,188 (56.9%)	▲ 265
5～9	4,816 (18.7%)	4,898 (18.4%)	▲ 82
10～	3,998 (15.5%)	3,740 (14.0%)	258
Total	25,807 (100.0%)	26,683 (100.0%)	▲ 876

More than 80% of SAC Centers provided on-the-job training, and 86.7% of SAC Centers had SAC workers who had participated in training programs for accepting children with disabilities.

Table 6: Number of SAC Centers offering training

	2023	2022	Increase/Decrease
Conducting training to improve qualifications	25,109 (97.3%)	25,923 (97.2%)	▲ 814
Conducting OJT in the workplace	20,899 (81.0%)	21,425 (80.3%)	▲ 526
Conducting training to accept children with disabilities	22,379 (86.7%)	23,131 (86.7%)	▲ 752

7. Current Research on School-Age Care (SAC) in Japan

(1) Historical research on SAC

There are significantly fewer papers on SAC than nursery care or school education. Research on SAC has lagged significantly even though at least 1 million children use SAC.

According to Shun Suzuki⁹⁾, studies on SAC began to appear sporadically in the 1960s. However, it was in the 2000s that the subject became a full-fledged research topic. There were 10 articles on this subject published in the first half of the 1990s in academic association journals or university journals that can be searched on a database operated by the National Institute of Informatics of Japan. The number increased to 17 in the latter half of the 1990s, 51 in the first half of the 2000s, and 94 in the latter half of the 2000s. The number doubled to 189 in the first half of the 2010s largely because of the establishment of the ‘Japanese Research Association of After School Care,’ which will be discussed later in this article.

The research themes include play, life, afternoon snacks, and such in SAC; care and inclusion of children with disabilities; support for child rearing and families in SAC; professional development of SAC workers; operation and management of SAC Centers; construction, facilities, and the environment of SAC Centers; the system and policies on SAC; history of SAC; and SAC in other countries.



(2) Japanese Research Association of After School Care

The Japanese Research Association of After School Care is an academic organization that promotes research on SAC in Japan (<http://www.gakudouhoikugakkai.com/>). It was established in 2010 and has about 200 members. Of these, about 100 are researchers affiliated with universities, about 70 are SAC workers, and about 30 are members of operating bodies, etc.

The association holds a research conference every year around June. At the conference research topics are set and nominated researchers and SAC workers make presentations and engage in discussions regarding such issues. In recent years, the following topics have been set:

(2024)

- "Making a place for children" and SAC
- The expertise of SAC workers and the assignments facing the professional community: Focusing on issues of trauma-informed care

(2023)

- Dignity and rights of children in the community and after school, and SAC practice
- How does the understanding of children change SAC practice?

(2022)

- Relationship between SAC and the local community
- Examining the teamwork of SAC workers

(2021)

- What was expected of SAC amid the COVID-19 crisis and how did it respond?
- Developmental support for children with developmental difficulties and SAC practice: Focusing on the acquisition of the power to control emotions

(2019)

- Japan-Republic of Korea academic exchange symposium: Child-Centered life and culture creation in SAC and social contributions by corporations
- Exploration of inclusive SAC: Focusing on the problems of children in difficult nurturing environments

(2018)

- Exploring the origin of SAC: Learning from its history and questioning what after-school means in the community
- Inclusive education and SAC



8. Problems on School-Age Care (SAC) in Japan

(1) Need to increase the number of SAC Centers and the problems related to facilities and equipment brought about by an expansion in the number of children

First, the government should increase the number of SAC Centers, accommodate more children, and reduce the waiting list. To achieve this, the government has created the “New After-School Children Comprehensive Plan (2019-2023),” which aims to use elementary school facilities to increase the number of SAC Centers. However, the plan is facing challenges as schools have started using previously unused rooms to meet the needs of different children, making it difficult to establish SAC Centers in elementary schools as planned.

Therefore, in order to accommodate more children, SAC Centers are thus accepting more children than they have planned for. This creates a cramped environment that is highly stressful for children. Improving the care environment is also a major challenge, including securing space for unwell children to rest undisturbed, providing sufficient toilets, and creating spacious area for children to freely move around and play.

(2) Need to secure SAC workers and improve their working condition

One of the reasons for the slow increase in the number of SAC Centers is a shortage of SAC workers. This is probably due to the following four reasons: 1. The work is generally not considered full-time because children only attend SAC on weekdays after school. However, they must work long hours on Saturdays and during school breaks from early morning, resulting in uneven work hours. 2 This work is physically demanding because SAC workers need to use their physical abilities, such as running around with children. 3 This job requires a high level of expertise in ensuring the safety and development of various children and effectively communicating with their parents/guardians. 4 Despite the hard work and the professional skills required, the wages are low.

In 2021, the average annual income (including allowances and lump-sum payments) of SAC workers was 2,857,000 yen (average length of service: 6.1 years) for full-time employees paid monthly, 1,461,000 yen (average length of service: 6.2 years) for part-time employees paid monthly, 1,293,000 yen (average length of service: 5.9 years) for full-time employees paid hourly, and 750,000 yen (average length of service: 4.5 years) for part-time employees paid hourly¹⁰⁾. In contrast, according to data from 2019, the average annual compensation for workers across all industries was 5,007,000 yen (average length of service: 12.4 years), and for full-time nursery teachers it was 3,635,000 yen (average length of service: 7.8 years)¹¹⁾. Thus, the wages of SAC workers are very low compared to other occupations. This is because the amount of subsidy from the government is low. This makes SAC workers an unattractive occupation for many people, resulting in a shortage of them. In order to resolve the shortage of SAC workers, it is necessary to improve their working conditions.

(3) Need to improve or standardize the quality of SAC and develop the expertise of SAC workers

The increase in the number of SAC Centers has widened the disparities among these facilities. In many regions, children cannot choose which SAC Center to attend; they must attend the facility established in each elementary school district. However, Private-build and private-operated SAC Centers, which have been established in large cities in recent years, are an exception to this and could be an option. Therefore, there is a significant disparity between areas with many choices of SAC Centers and those without. Thus, it is necessary to standardize the services to ensure a certain level of quality regardless of where children live. For this reason, the government established national standards in 2015 and has been working on various measures such as establishing the “Guidelines for the operation of After-School Children’s Clubs”. The creation of the certificate of ‘the after-school child support worker’ was also done to improve and standardize the quality of SAC. However, whether this certificate system has led to an improvement in the expertise of each SAC worker has yet to be validated at this time. More training opportunities need to be provided for those working at SAC Centers. SAC Centers significantly impact children's development since they spend more time at these Centers than elementary schools. Thus, it is necessary to establish and institutionalize the content and methods of fostering and training SAC workers, who are the system's backbone, and ensure the quality of their expertise.

In 2021, the government began a project to subsidize third-party evaluation of SAC Centers. The government has presented the evaluation criteria¹²⁾, but the system needs to be used more. It is necessary to promote the third-party evaluation system to ensure the quality of SAC Centers, and to explore the contents and methods of evaluation that may be effective for quality assurance. Quality concerns have been raised regarding certain “SAC Centers” (some operators use this designation even if they are not recognized by the municipality) run by private-sector operators. The third-party evaluation system may serve to improve the quality of such Centers.

(4) Cooperation and collaboration between SAC Centers, schools and the community, and the implementation of After-School measures for all children

“After-School Children’s Clubs must seek to interact and cooperate with the local community” (Article 5 of “Standards concerning the facilities and operations of services for the sound upbringing of after-school children”) and “work closely with the municipality, child welfare facilities, the elementary school the users attend, and so on, to support the users” (Article 20). However, the way SAC Centers cooperate and collaborate with the school and the local community varies from one Center to another. Some SAC Centers only provide services within their facilities and do not cooperate with the school or the local community. This is probably due to the following reasons: 1 The significance, purpose, and content of cooperation and exchange with the school and the local community are not sufficiently shared information by SAC workers, the school, and the local community; 2 Due to the shortage of SAC workers, SAC Centers are so focused on the internal daily activities that they are unable to collaborate with the school or the local community; 3 SAC is utilized by a small number of children, particularly those with working parents. Schools that

prioritize equality are hesitant to cooperate with SAC Centers.

SAC Centers must collaborate closely with school and community initiatives instead of solely providing care for children within their Centers. This helps create a safer and more fulfilling after-school experience for children. Another challenge is establishing a comprehensive network of after-school programs that benefit not only those who use SAC Centers, but all children, allowing them to spend their time in ways that meet their individual needs.

(5) Expansion and internationalization of research on SAC

Research SAC is still in its infancy. There are few researchers in this field. Most of them have other areas of study, but they sometimes conduct research on SAC. Many of them are researchers in fields such as school pedagogy, social pedagogy, child welfare, domestic science, and architecture. SAC has not yet been established as a research field, and there are no university teaching positions in this subject. The future challenge, along with the establishment of a training system for SAC workers at universities, is to establish this discipline as an independent research field.

Furthermore, there are few research presentations at international academic conferences or international collaborative projects in this field. It is important to share the practices and researches related to Japan's SAC with the world, introduce the findings of global practices and researches to Japan, and actively engage in international initiatives to ensure that the after-school experiences of children worldwide are in their best interest.

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