

Understanding Youth Development in Japan: Our Mission and Impact



Our Mission

Dream for Kids Japan exists to help disadvantaged children grow up with the confidence and self-esteem to believe that they can achieve any dream they work toward.



Dream for Kids Japan — originally Touchstone Dream for Kids — was established in 2001 with the goal of helping children to lead normal lives despite being in difficult circumstances. Since the organization’s establishment, Dream for Kids Japan has steadily grown its programs to address the growing needs of youth in Japan.

Youth development programs are vital for the personal, social, and economic growth of young people and their communities. These programs—whether in education, sports, arts, leadership, health, or civic engagement—help guide youth through critical developmental stages and prepare them for productive adulthood.

Who We Support

→ Youth in Japan

Globally, youth represent hopeful futures, yet they face significant challenges in realizing this potential due to circumstances beyond their control. In Japan, youth face challenges such as poverty, discrimination, abuse and neglect, and the right the education. Dream for Kids Japan works to alleviate some of these challenges by supporting community-based projects that make a real impact on the lives of children and families in their communities.

→ Community-based Initiatives

Community-based peacebuilding is a grassroots approach to peace promotion that involves the active participation of community members in identifying problems, developing solutions, and rebuilding relationships. It focuses on addressing the root causes of conflict, fostering dialogue, and strengthening social cohesion through locally-driven, culturally appropriate methods. Since its establishment, Dream for Kids Japan has sought to identify and support community-based initiatives, which we believe make the most impact for children at the grassroots level.

Challenges Faced by Youth

Poverty

Despite being amongst the top 5 strongest economies in the world, **Japan's relative poverty rate is 15%**, a percentage considered high for a developed nation. For children, this figure is particularly concerning, with some estimating **1 in 6 children in Japan live in relative poverty**. Social stigma and lack of awareness of this issue has resulted in inadequate resources and support for children.

Abuse/Neglect

In the past decade, the statistics on child abuse in Japan have continued to climb, with child guidance centers nationwide logging the **highest number of consultations** about child abuse on record in FY 2023. Child maltreatment in Japan encompasses neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse (including witnessing domestic violence), and sexual abuse by caregivers.

Relative poverty refers to a condition where individuals or households have significantly less income or resources compared to the average or median in their society, making it difficult for them to maintain an acceptable standard of living. Children living in relative poverty face inequality and social exclusion among other barriers.

Discrimination

Racial, gender, and disability discrimination are issues that affect many people in Japan, including young people. One factor influencing children's experiences of discrimination is that they may have limited knowledge or education on how to appropriately recognize and discuss differences. Regarding gender, societal perceptions of gender roles can influence the opportunities available to both boys and girls. Children born to non-Japanese parents may also face challenges, as they can experience prejudice or exclusion for being different. This can lead to social caution from peers, higher instances of bullying, and limited education on diversity and respect for others.

Awareness of disabilities is limited in youth education. Like other societal challenges, a lack of open discussion around mental and physical disabilities can affect efforts to provide adequate support for individuals with special needs.

Right to Education

Children in the schooling system often face pressure to achieve high academic standards. This can affect their mental health and sense of self-worth, as the system tends to recognize those who perform well academically while not always providing the resources and support needed by those who may require additional assistance.

Support Systems for Children

01 Government Support

Although the government provides financial support to families in need, there are a significant number of children who rely on alternative care facilities due to neglect, abuse, or parental hardship. For children whose circumstances require them to live separate from their immediate families, the Japanese government provides alternative care facilities.

The two major placement options for children are jidō yōgo shisetsu 児童養護施設 (child welfare institution), and sato oya 里親 (family foster care). As of 2022, of the percentage of children who do not live with their birth parents, **22.8% live in foster care and 77.2% live in orphanages**. The conditions and quality of care in each orphanage throughout Japan differs greatly. Generally, there is a low number of staff responsible for nurturing these children and their involvement is limited, preventing children from receiving the well-rounded care that they need. There are over **600 care homes** in Japan and around **40,000 children live in alternative care**.

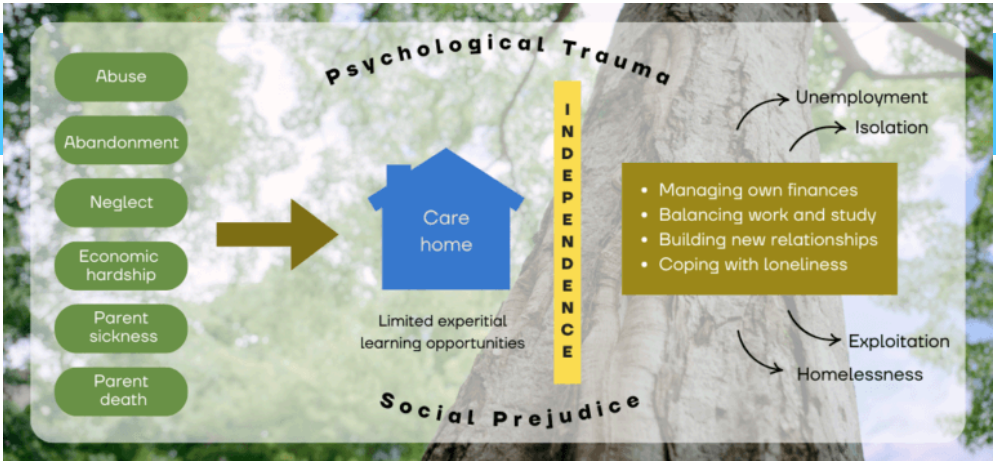


Figure adapted from Mirai no Mori, NPO

Becoming Independent and the Challenges Ahead

Children raised in Japan’s care homes face persistent social, psychological, and economic challenges that continue well into adulthood. Many experience discrimination when renting apartments, finding jobs, or enrolling in school, often concealing their background to avoid stigma. Years of instability leave lasting effects such as low self-esteem, poor communication skills, indecisiveness, fear of failure, and difficulty trusting others. At 18, when they are required to leave care and live independently, these young adults must suddenly manage finances, work, and housing with little preparation or support. While about 60% of high school graduates in Japan attend university, only 20% of care home graduates do so. The abrupt transition and lack of safety nets often lead to unemployment, isolation, exploitation, or homelessness. With few systemic safeguards, many young adults continue to face overwhelming obstacles in building stable, independent lives.

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Non-Government Support

Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs)

NPOs address a range of needs for youth in Japan. Programs support children's mental health, education, and engagement as well as addressing challenges faced within child care institutions. NPOs fill gaps in the government care system through advocacy, community building, partnerships and collaboration. **90% of Japanese NPOs receive funding from domestic sources (individual donors and foundations) and 63% receive government grants.**

Private Corporations

Corporations in Japan play an active role as funders in the non-profit sector. Still, there is significant room for improvement for corporations funding social services as there is a growing commitment to corporate social responsibility. Although 2024 figures on corporate giving are limited, the overall trend in Japan indicates **increasing engagement with the non-profit sector** driven by CSR initiatives, strategic partnerships, and impact investing.

Concerned Citizens

Individuals and concerned citizens form the foundation of non-profit organizations. Many organizations and social welfare programs **rely almost entirely on support from volunteers and individual donors.**

Our Approach and Methodology



Community-based Philosophy

Our community-based philosophy to youth development is an approach that seeks to ensure local ownership of support initiatives in design and practice, ‘to take local knowledge fully into account in designing programs and assessing conflicts, and to strive for the meaningful participation of local actors’ (Connolly & Powers 2018). From selecting the type of infrastructure to evaluation frameworks, the projects are managed by the community collective, rather than as is the case of traditional development approaches, where the executing agency, international government or non- governmental organizations dominate the process.

Programs

Dream for Kids Japan is involved in a wide variety of activities to support children in different parts of the country.

Employment Services Project

Experiential Learning
for Children in Tohoku

Setagaya Music Therapy

After School Care

Alternative Care Home
Partnerships

Disability Support

Scholarship Program



More about the programs we support...

- **Employment Services Project** To alleviate some of the challenges faced by young adults as they transition to independent living, we provide employment, housing, and financial support to young people on a case by case basis.
- **Alternative Care Home Partnerships** In addition to providing children with monthly hair cutting and styling, our volunteers working at the Yokohama care homes facilitate experiential learning opportunities such as porcelarts, cooking classes, and more.
- **After School Care** In partnership with a local bakery, Dream for Kids supports an ongoing program that gives children in foster care the opportunity to learn practical skills while also enjoying the fruits of their labor. Additionally, in partnership with a local organization in Ikebukuro, we support after school care programs for families.
- **Disability Support** Together with another NPO, we provide funding and assistance for Japanese children with medical issues and physical disabilities with the goal of increasing their independence.
- **Setagaya Music Therapy** Dream for Kids Japan supported a heartwarming musical gathering for children and young people with the theme “Let’s Take Back Our Song!” The concert featured vibrant band performances, percussion ensembles, and sign language communication, offering a rich and engaging experience.
- **Experiential Learning for Children in Tohoku** Every August, in collaboration with another NPO, we send children affected by the disaster in Fukushima to a summer camp for two weeks, where they are provided with caring, emotional support.
- **Scholarship Program** This year, we launched a scholarship program that will provide disadvantaged youth with unique opportunities to better their future.

Interview with Valued Partner and Volunteer, D-Color's Yuki-sama

→ **What motivated you to get involved in this volunteer activity?**

I began volunteering around 15 years ago when Mr. Uruma established the partnership with Kawawa-Asahi Jido Home.

→ **Is there a particular episode or moment with the children at the orphanage that left a strong impression on you?**

When I go to give haircuts as a volunteer, even though everyone has different appointment times, the children often don't have anything to do or don't have money, so they wait for me from early on. Interacting with the children makes me feel almost like an older sister, which makes me very happy.

→ **What changes have you noticed in the children over time during your monthly visits?**

There is very little interaction with their families, and their relationships with family members seem very weak. Because of this, the children often struggle to put into words the experiences they've had or the emotional wounds they've received. When they turn 18 and leave the facility or foster home, this can make communication with others difficult, leading them to become introverted and withdrawn.

→ **From your experience, what challenges do you see in Japan's child welfare or foster care system?**

I think the staff members are very kind, but currently, communication between the staff and the children is often insufficient. When staff members change, the children sometimes appear to feel anxious. Unfortunately, it is difficult to increase staff numbers or enhance support at this time.



What do you think are the most urgent needs or difficulties faced by the children?

We want to provide more activities for the children, but frequent staff changes make it difficult to plan and carry out such events.



How has this volunteer work affected or changed you personally?

By interacting with the children, I've developed a stronger desire to provide them with what I didn't receive myself, and I want to be even more helpful. I want to continue volunteering even if I get sick, and I'm willing to help with events like Shichi-Go-San and Coming-of-Age ceremonies.



Looking Forward: Strategies for Sustainable Outcomes

Increasing Stakeholder Engagement

One of the main inhibitors to improving the child welfare system is lack of awareness and lack of public discussion of this issue. Volunteers, administrators, and concerned citizens alike all note the challenges associated with a culture of silence around this issue. Dream for Kids has the opportunity to engage its stakeholders on the importance of the issue of youth and family support, thereby creating overall awareness. This effectively creates a greater sense of urgency around the issue, encouraging people to take action whether by donating, volunteering, or educating others.

Strengthen and Grow Corporate Partnerships

Through mainly employee giving, DFK has garnered long-term, loyal supporters. Thus, there is a critical advantage for DFK to focus on corporate partnerships as a primary strategy for addressing the needs of children in Japan.

Collaboration with Industry Experts

Continuing as well as expanding DFK's ongoing efforts to collaborate and support fellow NPOs, specifically at the community level, is one way DFK will make a guaranteed impact for children in need.

Organizational Structure at a Glance:

Dream for Kids Board of Directors

Fred Masato Uruma, Founder and Chairman
Toshihiro Hirosaki
Masashi Hiraiwa
Yoshiaki Ono

Personnel

Kumiko Morita
Tomomi Sekine



Contact

Email Address:

info@dreamforkids.jp

Telephone:

03-5575-6770

