

## An introduction to Japanese elementary school life

### Background notes for teachers

© Japan Society (2024)

This resource is for KS2 children (ages 7 – 11 years old) and focuses specifically on aspects of **elementary school life**. The background notes on this resource may also cover some aspects of junior and senior high school life also.

Under the Japanese education system, children enter elementary school at the age of 6 and leave at the age of 12 (years 1 – 6 / 1 年 ~ 6 年). After this, they attend junior high school from ages 12 – 15 (years 7 – 9 / 7 年 ~ 9 年), and then senior high school from ages 15 – 18 (years 10 – 12 / 1 0 年 ~ 1 2 年).

### School year

In Japan, the school year runs from April to March of the following year. At the start and end of the school year, there are special opening and closing ceremonies for pupils to attend. For many Japanese people, the opening ceremony of the school year is often associated with the cherry blossom season, as this often occurs around the same time of year.

### School uniform

In elementary school, children do not wear a uniform, however some private elementary schools may require children to wear one. You may sometimes see elementary school children wearing colourful hats. This is so they stand out to other people whilst walking to school; adults can help them if they need to; cars can stop to allow them to cross the road; and so on.

Despite not having school uniforms, you may notice a lot of elementary school children walking to school wearing large, round backpacks – these are known as randoseru (ランドセル). Randoseru are usually made of leather and can be very expensive, however children usually keep the same randoseru throughout their time in elementary school. Their large size and flap cover makes it easy for children to store all of their textbooks and notebooks inside.

When children arrive at school, they enter the building through the entrance, also known as genkan (玄関). Here, they will change into their indoor shoes that they specifically only wear within the school building, to help keep the floors clean. This is a custom that can be observed across Japan; even when entering someone's home, you must take your shoes off first before entering. Children usually keep their shoes in a cupboard or on a shelf by the genkan.

## Travel to school

It is normal for elementary school children even as young as 6 years old to walk to school without an adult, however, they often walk together in groups with friends or siblings. Year 5 and 6 pupils often meet the year 1 and 2 pupils and walk together with them to school. Some elementary school pupils will travel to school by bus or by train if they live too far away to walk.

## Lessons and extracurricular activities

Children in Japanese elementary schools study largely the same subjects as children in British primary schools, although the curriculum content does differ. Subjects include Japanese, mathematics, science, arts and crafts, home economics (basic cooking and sewing skills), music, PE, moral education (similar to PSHE), and English (as a foreign language).

It is also common for schools to offer lessons on traditional Japanese arts such as calligraphy (shodo 書道), where children will use special brushes and ink to write Japanese words in a traditional, artistic way.

In junior high school and senior high school, students are expected to participate in afterschool club activities; usually sports, music, or arts related. In elementary school, some children do participate in extracurricular activities, but it is not expected of them to do so. Soccer and baseball in particular are popular sports for elementary school boys.

## Lunch time

Children eat school dinners together in their classrooms with their classmates and their teacher. One interesting aspect about lunch times at Japanese schools is that pupils take it in turns to serve each other their food. They usually wear an apron and hat when doing so. This is to encourage values such as teamwork and responsibility to one another in the classroom and across the school. In many schools, a nutritionist will prepare the school lunch menu, ensuring that each meal is healthy and nutritionally balanced. In rare cases, pupils may bring a packed lunch to school, also known as obento (お弁当) (for example, if they have allergies).

## Cleaning

An interesting fact about Japanese schools is that pupils take responsibility of cleaning the schools themselves. Usually after lunch or at the end of the school day, children will clean and tidy their classrooms, hallways, and around the school grounds. This is done to emphasise the value of teamwork and taking responsibility for not only each other but also their whole school. At the end of the school year, a deep clean usually takes place.