

# INTERCOUNTRY No. 52, (issued March 31, 2017)

ISSJ News

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## **Adoption Cases Assisted by ISSJ for the Last 10 Years**

### **Current Status of Adoption**

In recent years, the number of children requiring welfare protection due to parental abuse or neglect has risen to 48,000 nationally (the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare's report on the number of children entering child care institutions in 2013). Among them, infants placed in baby homes and children in child care institutions account for 69.3% compared to 11.2% placed with foster parents (including family homes). This illustrates the harsh reality of persistent shortage of opportunities for children to be raised in a family-based environment.

Although there is a special adoption system in Japan, it only applies to children under the age of 6 which makes it harder for school-aged children to be adopted. Moreover, due to insufficient understanding or awareness on the part of child care institutions or foster families' homes, there is almost no effort to have siblings be adopted by the same family. In response to this situation, ISSJ adoption services include intercountry matchings in order to maximize opportunities for these children to grow up in a family-based environment.

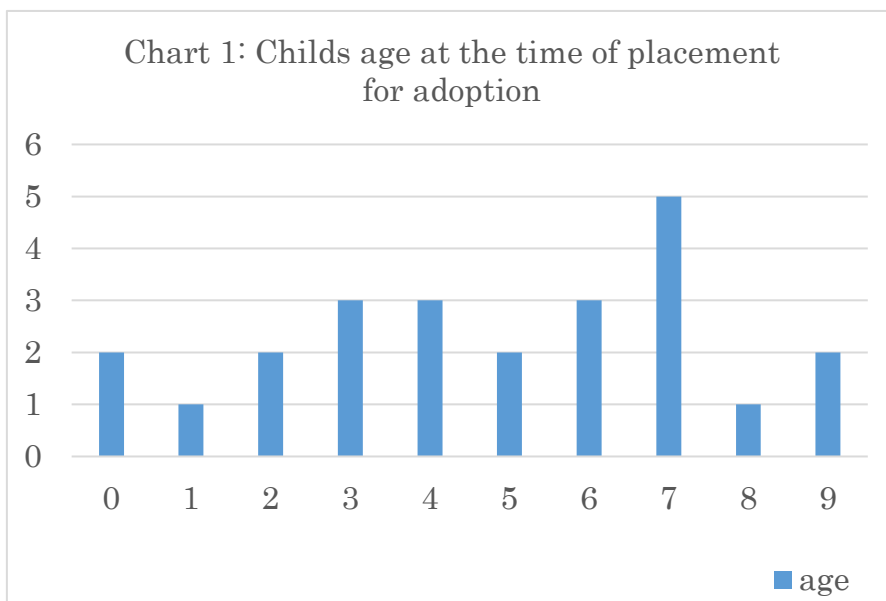
### **Boys Make up 80% of Adoptions Arranged by ISSJ**

#### **– Effort to Place Siblings Together**

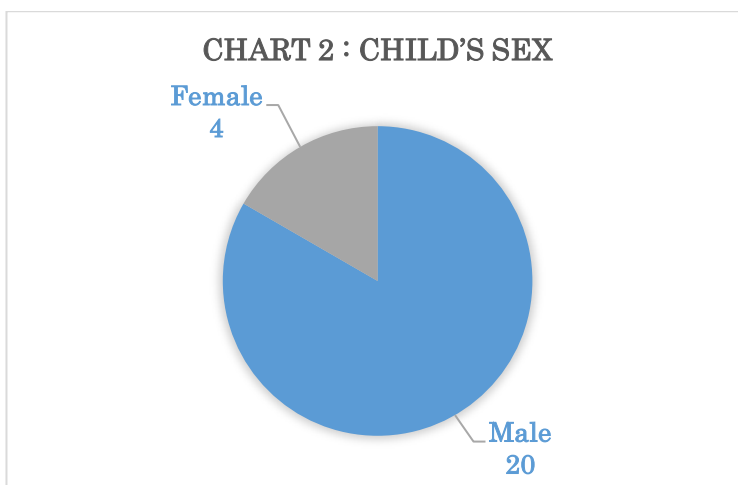
Between 2006 and 2016, ISSJ arranged adoptions for 24 children. All of these cases were referred to us from child guidance centers. 23 children were of Japanese nationality

while one child was stateless. In terms of age, the oldest child adopted through us during this period was 7 years old while the average age was 4.7 years. We are seeing a recent trend of older children being referred to us for adoption. (Chart 1)

At ISSJ, we strive to keep siblings together and place them with the same adoptive family as much as possible. In the past 10 years, we have handled three such adoption cases; one with three siblings and two with two siblings. Also, 80% of the adopted children through ISSJ were boys. (Chart 2)



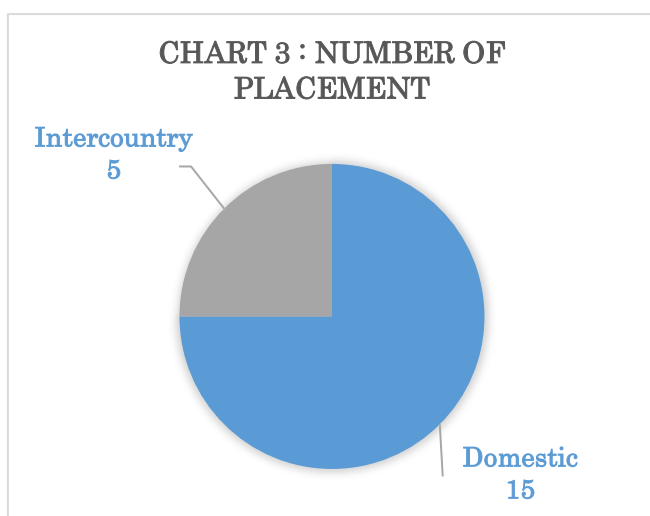
Total: 24 children (including one case with three siblings and two cases with two siblings)



### Priority of Domestic Placement

During the past 10 years, 15 adoption cases we handled were placements with families living in Japan, representing 75% of the total of 20 cases, while only 5 cases involved families living abroad. At ISSJ, we give domestic placement a priority in order to make the transition easier for the adopted children. At the same time, we also consider international placement as it can provide more opportunities for children to be cared for in a family-based environment. Among the adoptive parents, 13 cases involved American couples, while the rest were of different nationalities from various European countries, Canada, and in some cases with one parent of Japanese nationality.

As of late, there has been an increase in the number of adoption inquiries from Japanese couples living abroad as well as those living in Japan. For many years since our inception, ISSJ has traditionally focused on adoptions that involve two or more nationalities between adoptive parents and the child. However, in response in part to the increased interest from Japanese couples, we started handling cases for Japanese couples adopting a Japanese child two years ago. (Chart 3)



### Changes in Children's Home Environment

We also have witnessed big changes in children's home environment in Japan in the past 10 years. The number of consultations sought due to alleged child abuse or neglect surpassed 10,000 annually (in 2015) and the number of children entering baby homes or child care institutions because of abuse at home has also increased. Moreover, there has been an increase in the ratio of children with cognitive or development disability (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2013 Report). While there appears to be a growing interest in adoption among couples, we can surmise that most of them are

interested in adopting healthy babies. In order to make it possible for children in disadvantaged situations to be accepted, we believe in promoting understanding and appreciation of the circumstances of a child's birth, upbringing, and/or disability. In addition, we believe that post-adoption support for adoptive parents is extremely critical.

### **Strengthening the Relationship between Public and Private Child Welfare Organizations**

With the enactment of a new Section Two under Article Three of the Child Welfare Act in May of last year, the need for national and prefectural governments to take on the responsibility of developing appropriate measures to maximize opportunities for children to be raised in a family-based environment has been clearly highlighted. In addition, last December, for the purposes of ensuring the quality of private adoption agencies and enhancing protection of children, a new set of licensing laws for private adoption agencies were promulgated. It has therefore become necessary for ISSJ to carefully review and understand the effect of these new laws in so far as they relate to our adoption support services.

This year, ISSJ received a grant from Welfare and Medical Service Agency (WAM) and organized a total of three conferences in Tokyo and Osaka in order to investigate the level of coordination between public and private organizations related to child welfare. Attendees included representatives and staff members from child consultation centers and child care facilities who commented that the conferences provided a rare and valuable opportunity for them to learn about the role and capabilities of private adoption agencies. From our perspective, we felt that we were able to deepen mutual understanding between attendees in an effort to promote family-based child care. (Enomoto)



## **Searching Birth Roots from Germany**

(One of the services offered by ISSJ is assisting adopted children with their search for birth roots. Here is a real-life story of reunion for birth parents and child.)

In October 2015, ISSJ received a request from ISS branch office in Germany for our assistance in locating birth roots for a man residing in Germany. In 1976, ISSJ arranged an adoption of a one-year old Japanese boy for a German couple living in Japan at the time. After the adoption, he lost all contact with his birth parents and now lives in Northern Germany with his German wife and their four-year old son. He contacted ISS Germany hoping to see his birth parents if at all possible.

After receiving his request, ISSJ sent him an English translation of a child-study report that we had prepared for his adoption. He was very glad to read our report because it contained more information about his adoption than what he had heard from his adoptive parents. After confirming through ISSJ's report why his birth mother felt she had no choice but to give him up for adoption, his desire to see his birth mother became stronger. Thereafter, the social worker assigned to this case confirmed the address of his birth mother and sent a letter asking her to contact the agency regarding an important message from her birth son.

The birth mother replied through a close friend of hers as she did not own a phone at her house. Soon thereafter, the birth mother came into the ISSJ's office with her friend and told us about her own life after the adoption as well as the life of the birth father who had passed away earlier. Our social worker then sent the man in Germany a summary of what his birth mother said along with photos of her and his deceased birth father. When the adopted man received these photos and the new information from ISSJ, he decided to come to Japan to reunite with his birth mother. Likewise, his birth mother also expressed her desire to reunite with her son.

In November 2016, he arrived in Japan with his wife and son. The reunion meeting between him and his birth mother took place in ISSJ's office, throughout which two of them looked happy holding their hands together. Having spent the childhood in many countries in Africa and Europe, the adopted son spoke fluent English. The ISSJ social worker provided translation and facilitated communication between the birth mother and her son during the reunion.

Next day, the ISSJ social worker accompanied the two of them to see the adopted man's elder brother (birth mother's eldest son). The elder brother felt blessed to be reunited with his younger brother. He had known about the existence of a younger brother through family registry but it appears that he had had no information about him



whatsoever. However, the two brothers are close in age and soon discovered they have many things in common, such as their interest in hard rock music and watching sports, which helped them to quickly rekindle a sense of intimacy as brothers.

When the reunion ended, the son promised his birth mother that he would return to Japan to see her again and the mother promised him that she would look after her health till such day.

# REPORT

## **Training Program for Parent-Child Visitation or Contact Assistance**

Participation in the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) hosted by the U.S. Department of State

Ms. Enomoto, one of ISSJ social workers, participated in the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) for 10 days from December 4, 2016. IVLP was established by the U.S. Department of State in 1940 to provide opportunities for international professionals to exchange experiences and ideas with their American counterparts and to deepen their understanding of the current status in the U.S. as well as the background and future prospects in their given field.

The theme for 2016 was the implementation of the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. Ten participants from Japan included lawyers, clinical psychologists, academics, and a social worker with experience in divorce and parent-child visitation or contact. They visited welfare agencies in Washington DC, Miami, and Portland and also met with many American professionals such as judges, lawyers, psychologists, and social workers to exchange views on the U.S. judicial system and family law pertaining to divorce and parental rights, parent-child visitation or contact, and family reunion.

For example, the Japanese participants attended a lecture at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC\*) presented by various professionals on the effect of family reunion on a child's psychology, understanding childhood trauma and availability of therapeutic services. They also heard a true-life story from a person about being kidnapped by her father and how she eventually was returned to her mother. Taking part in this program provided Ms. Enomoto a valuable opportunity to develop new relationships with child-welfare practitioners not only in the U.S. but also in Japan and to learn diverse points of view from many professionals in related fields. She is eager to incorporate what she learned from this program into her work in parent-child visitation or contact in international divorce cases within the framework of the Hague Convention.

### **\*NCMEC and Team HOPE**

NCMEC is a private, non-profit organization established in the U.S. in 1984 to serve

as the national clearinghouse for missing and physically and/or sexually abused children. With the support of many professionals such as lawyers and psychologists, the Center provides many types of support and resources on the Internet as well as a hot-line service to help locate missing children and provide support for physically and sexually abused children. “Team Hope” is one of many programs run by the Center, for parents who have had, or still have, a child who is missing or has been sexually exploited. The parent-volunteers who have suffered similar ordeals are trained at the Center and provide peer counselling and emotional support to parents whose child remains missing or who are adjusting to being reunited with their child.

Two social workers from NCMEC visited ISSJ office last year and shared with us their experiences and perspectives on the role of social work support for parent-child visitation or contact. ISSJ looks forward to building a close working relationship with NCMEC by continuing to engage in an ongoing exchange of ideas and perspectives.

### **ISSJ's Assistance with Parent-Child Visitation or Contact**

ISSJ provides assistance with parent-child visitation or contact due to the failure of international marriages. Since Japan ratified the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction in 2014, the number of consultations referred to ISSJ has been steadily on the rise. In 2016, we also started receiving inquiries from people living in countries in Europe and Asia.



## What's New?

### ●News from families to whom ISSJ provided adoption assistance--

Greeting cards from families of former ISSJ's clients.

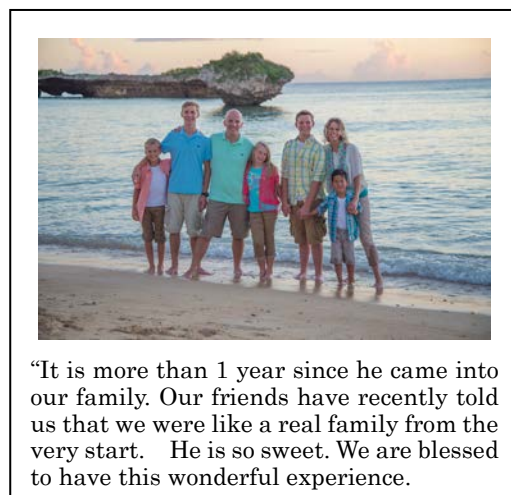


At each year-end and the New Year, we receive greeting cards from families to whom ISSJ had provided adoption assistance in the past. These days, many greetings are sent by E-mail resulting in fewer paper cards than in prior years, but we still receive a few handwritten messages from adoptees and we are always happy to get their updated news. We are surprised to see how the adoptees

with big smiles on their faces start to look more and more like the adoptive family members as the time passes.



"Doing well at school and in sports. He has grown a lot. We are very proud of him."



"It is more than 1 year since he came into our family. Our friends have recently told us that we were like a real family from the very start. He is so sweet. We are blessed to have this wonderful experience."

### ●ISSJ's Client, One-time Asylum Seeker

A man from Africa completed a master's degree at a university in Japan and started working as an engineer this spring. Clad in a business suit that was a little too long for him and carrying a bound copy of his master's thesis in a briefcase, he stopped by our office to tell us how he was doing lately. About six years ago when he was seeking asylum, ISSJ provided consultation to him on obtaining medical care.

After receiving specialized education in his home country, he worked there as an engineer. The first time the ISSJ social worker met him, they talked to each other in English but he applied himself to mastering Japanese language in the midst of difficulties that he

was facing as an asylum seeker. Then, he met a university professor who took notice of his determination and started helping him, including mentoring him to gain admission to a graduate school. Eventually, he passed the entrance examination in Japanese and was admitted to a graduate school.

The professor was impressed by his enthusiasm for studying. He spent all his money on technical books so that his water and gas got shut off when he couldn't pay the bills, and in the end, he had to call us from a pay phone to ask for help. It was not easy for him to balance his part-time job and university studies. The following message shows his sensitive and sincere character; "I faced many challenges in becoming a graduate school student. After receiving much support from many people, I learnt the importance of human relationships and I am so grateful for all their kind support. I now want to give back to society by doing good work. I want to support young people who are facing difficulties as I was so that they can look forward to their future with a sense of hope." ISSJ would also like to express our gratitude for the support you have given him over the years.

A copy of his master's thesis written in Japanese and his case file at ISSJ office.

Time to close this case?



## ●Refugee Community Support



We, at ISSJ, provide support to various refugee communities located in various parts of Japan through regular home visits and consultations. Unlike those living in the Tokyo metropolitan area, refugees

in provincial towns do not have easy access to necessary welfare support. The reasons include limited availability of resources and scarcity of support staff or volunteers who can help them gain access to the appropriate services they need. Moreover, other

factors such as cultural differences and financial constraints pose further obstacles for these refugees to acclimate to life in these provincial towns.

Despite the different challenges and situations faced by these towns concerning refugees, we are mindful of their plight in being forced to seek refuge in Japan and therefore we remain committed to working closely with them to find appropriate solutions and access to appropriate support. In particular, we have become aware of the high degree of risk for women refugees to become isolated from the communities due to their cultural and religious background.

In speaking face-to-face with women refugees living in Gunma Prefecture, we could sense their unease concerning the difficulties they have in utilizing opportunities for learning Japanese language and in educating their children in Japan. Aimed at addressing these concerns, we have been making preparations to establish Japanese language classes for these women as well as tutorial classes for their school-aged children. With tremendous cooperation from Gunma prefectural government office and agencies, public schools, and regional non-profit organizations, we expect that these classes will be successfully launched sometime in 2017.

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## Report from Palestine (Ishikawa Mieko)



At ISSJ, we provide support to refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Japan. Among them are refugees from many countries in the Middle East such as Syria and Palestine. The Middle East region, along with its neighboring states, is steeped in rich tradition and culture, but has been plagued by persistent wars and armed conflicts in recent history which have led to an enormous outflow of people being displaced from their homes.

In order to provide better support for the refugees, I had wanted to learn more about their circumstances when an opportunity came up last September for me to visit Israel and Palestine. Although Israel declared independence in 1948, it faced fierce opposition from a number of Arab nations that support

Palestine which led to a series of Arab-Israeli wars. The Oslo Accords signed in the 1990's planned for an interim self-government arrangement (the West Bank and the Gaza Strip)

Today the West Bank is divided into three areas based on administrative authority and police power. President Trump recently suggested relocating the capital of Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which is a sacred place of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. On this trip, I visited Jerusalem and West Bank areas including Bethlehem, Jericho, Hebron and Nablus.

It being my first trip to the Middle East, I was taken aback at seeing Israeli soldiers keeping guard all over town with rifles. It made me nervous to be so close to guns in plain sight although I wondered if it might help the Israelis feel safer. In order to enter the West Bank where Palestinians live, we had to pass through a checkpoint. It is prohibited for Israelis and Palestinians to enter each other's territory.

Over at the West Bank store and restaurant signs written in Arabic made me realize that I was now in a Palestine territory. During this trip, I was able to visit a school run by UNRWA.

There is a complicated history and emotional strife in Palestine. I could feel how people living there amidst persistent conflicts are struggling every day to simply maintain their daily lives. In self-government territories, Israel continues to expand their settlements and Palestinians keep losing their housing as well as jobs. However, Israel also has had to endure much hardship over the course of history that we Japanese cannot even imagine. There is also bitterness between Palestinian refugees living in refugee camps and Palestinian residents who are non-refugees, and nomadic people called the Bedouins live in the desert.



Rather than assigning blame onto one-side, we all need to keep working towards resolving conflicts in this region. After my trip, I feel even more strongly than ever that ISSJ must continue our work in supporting refugees and asylum seekers regardless of where they come from.