

## 2 Guides to formulation of curriculum

### What is curriculum?

We often see children play freely at kindergarten. However, it should be remembered that early childhood education is not the same as leaving children to play as they like in the field or in the park. There are clear frameworks when early childhood education is provided at a public educational facility, like a kindergarten. Among those frameworks, we call the total experience that children gain throughout a kindergarten life and its route ‘Curriculum’. The curriculum is a holistic educational framework at kindergarten.

The word ‘curriculum’ is derived from a Latin word ‘currere’, which refers to an ancient horse race or a track for horse racing. Therefore, the curriculum is a route that should be followed from the start to the goal, in early childhood education.

### 1 Curriculum in practice

#### (1) Law: The National Curriculum Standards for Kindergartens

In Japan, the curriculum is based on the law on education at kindergarten, ‘the National Curriculum Standards for Kindergartens’. It provides the following guidance on the formulation of curriculum.

- *Kindergartens should develop specific aims and curriculum content taking into consideration to the period of education, the experiences of children and the process of child development, in order for the aims to be comprehensively achieved throughout a child's time at kindergarten.*
- *Kindergartens should take measures based on long-term perspectives, taking into consideration the special characteristics of early childhood development, so that children can experience a fruitful life.*

The curriculum shows the educational aims and activities that a kindergarten sets, so that teachers will prepare for children with the intention of achieving particular aims. It covers time and space, starting from the time of entry to completion of kindergarten, and the space both inside and outside of kindergarten.

The curriculum is formulated by looking at three components: educational aims, guidelines for the formulation of the curriculum, and yearly instruction plans. The following is a curriculum of ‘one Japanese kindergarten’ in the Tohoku (northeast) region of Japan.

## (2) Educational aims

Educational aims reflect how teachers hope children will develop at kindergarten. Aims vary from one kindergarten to another. For instance, ‘one Japanese kindergarten’ aims for:

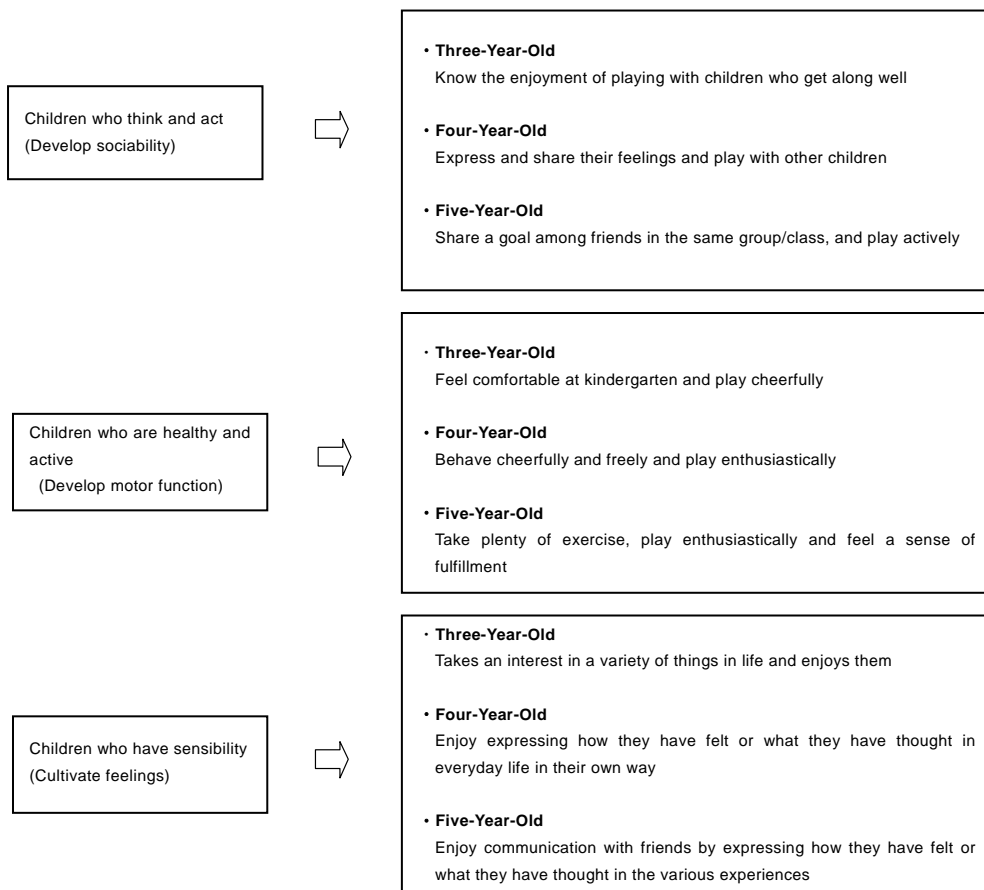
Children who broaden their minds, have dreams, and are lively  
 Children who think and act (Develop sociability)  
 Children who are healthy and active (Develop motor function)  
 Children who have sensibility (Cultivate feelings)

Although there are some differences among kindergartens, many of them set educational aims focusing on distinct aspects of child development, such as health, sociability, feelings, cognition, and expression etc., as this kindergarten does. But although there are distinct aspects, early childhood education is comprehensive and should be promoted as a whole.

As shown below, ‘this kindergarten’ makes its educational aims more specific, depending on the age of children, and calls them ‘developmental goals’.

### Developmental goals

Children who broaden their minds, have dreams, and are lively



By making the aims more specific as shown above, the aims become clearer and teachers can recognize that those aims can be achieved gradually as a child gets older.

### **(3) Guidelines for the formulation of the curriculum**

This kindergarten uses the following guidelines for the formulation of the curriculum.

Aim to

Provide an appropriate environment and support for the children, centered on play, to develop their ability to live flexibly.  
Improve the instruction system so that it makes the best of teachers' skills and creates a cooperative atmosphere  
Promote cooperation with parents and the community, through educational counseling and help with child care.

Guidelines should be flexible. Kindergartens should develop them continuously through evaluation by all staff, and in the light of the conditions and needs of children, parents and the community. Guidelines for 'Educational counseling' or 'Promotion of Support of Child Rearing', for example, should meet the needs of the community. Therefore, they will vary depending on the circumstances surrounding each kindergarten. Put simply, it is important to understand and address the needs of the children who come to kindergarten, *and* the needs of their families and community.

### **(4) Yearly instruction plan**

The curriculum covers the whole time that children attend a kindergarten, from entry to completion. Therefore, teachers formulate the curriculum depending on the period of education, which is usually 2 or 3 years in Japan. 'The National Curriculum Standards for Kindergartens' states that the minimum number of weeks per year of kindergarten education should be 39, and attendance is four hours each day.

Teachers divide the period of education into several and think about specific objectives and activities, to achieve the educational aims explained above. For instance, this kindergarten formulates a yearly instruction plan for each grade (3, 4 and 5 years old). Teachers make more specific plans: daily, weekly, monthly and periodical plans based on the yearly instruction plan.

Usually, a year is divided into 4-5 terms based on the consideration of children's life and development throughout a year depending on their age. Each term has its specific objectives and activities. For instance, the objectives during the first term of the first year of kindergarten (when a child is 3 years old in Japan) are 'feel comfortable with teachers and life at kindergarten and come to kindergarten cheerfully', and 'find favorite play and play tools and enjoy playing at kindergarten'. The content of early childhood education during this period is, 'find favorite play and play tools and play cheerfully', 'come to kindergarten joyfully and play in various ways', 'know how a day is organized at kindergarten and understand simple rules', and 'feel attached to teachers'. Teachers set those objectives because it is quite natural for three-year-old children who have just entered kindergarten to feel uneasy about spending a day at kindergarten without parents. If children can get acclimatized to the new life

and spend their day comfortably at kindergarten, they can take a step forward to new objectives and activities in the next stage. Furthermore, as they get older, objectives and activities are in accordance with several aspects of development - such as establishment of relationships with friends and teachers, a relationship with the environment, and self-expression - become higher and richer.

At this kindergarten, the activities in the yearly plan during winter, from December to March, are 'be interested in snow, ice and frost and enjoy play peculiar to winter' (four-years-old) and 'learn to put and take off jacket and gloves' (four-years-old). This reflects the fact that this kindergarten is located in the northeast region of Japan, where it is cold and it snows a lot. As can be seen in the case of this kindergarten, it is important to make the most of the natural environment and climate in the region where the kindergarten is located, when deciding the activities.

## **(5)Annual events**

Annual events are also included in the curriculum. The following table shows events generally conducted at Japanese kindergartens. Basically, the activities that children experience through various events are based on, and extended from, daily life at kindergarten. Events are valuable as they provide opportunities for children to have experiences that they do not usually have in everyday life at kindergarten. For instance, Japan has events that mark the stages of life at kindergarten or of a child's development, such as an entrance/leaving ceremony and birthday parties. We also hold events to learn and appreciate the Japanese seasons and traditional culture, such as Tanabata (Star Festival), Jyugoya (the night with a full moon), Setsubun (Bean Throwing Ceremony) and Hina-Matsuri (Doll Festival). In addition, we try to enrich the experiences of children by going on school trips or holding a sport festival. In addition, we plan events taking into consideration the regional and educational characteristics where the kindergarten is located.

In the formulation of the curriculum, it is important to consider when and how we conduct these events. It is important to make a plan taking into consideration the seasons or the level of child development so that children can feel the enjoyment of participation and a sense of fulfillment. In addition, events provide good opportunities to show how children have developed, and can encourage cooperation with parents or people in the community.

< Annual plan of events >

April	May	June
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opening Ceremony</li> <li>• Entrance Ceremony</li> <li>• Parents' Day</li> <li>• Annual Health Examination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children's Day Party</li> <li>• School Trip with Parents</li> <li>• Parents' Open Day</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planting vegetables (sweet potatoes and soybeans in the pod)</li> <li>• School Trip</li> <li>• Opening of Swimming Pool</li> </ul>
July	August	September
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Star Festival</li> <li>• Day to enjoy the cool of evening</li> <li>• Parents' Day</li> <li>• Closing Ceremony</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early Childhood Care During Summer Vacation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opening Ceremony</li> <li>• Emergency Drill</li> <li>• Harvest (soybeans in the pod)</li> <li>• Closing of Swimming Pool</li> </ul>
October	November	December
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sports Festival</li> <li>• Digging Sweet Potatoes</li> <li>• Parents' Day</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents' Open Day</li> <li>• School Trip</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children's show</li> <li>• Rice-cake Making Party</li> <li>• Closing Ceremony</li> </ul>
January	February	March
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opening Ceremony</li> <li>• Kite-flying</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bean Throwing Ceremony</li> <li>• School Trip</li> <li>• Visiting Elementary School</li> <li>• Parents' Day</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doll Festival</li> <li>• Farewell Party</li> <li>• Leaving Ceremony</li> <li>• Closing Ceremony</li> </ul>

## (6)Improvement of the curriculum

The curriculum should be flexible. Kindergartens should improve the curriculum after conducting appropriate reviews and evaluations of the educational processes, so that the curriculum reflects the children's conditions, encourages their development and contributes to the fulfillment of their life.