

Committee for Studying Strategy and Policy for Better Growing Environment to Promote  
Children's Vitality, Science Council of Japan (SCJ)

13 July 2007

Original: Japanese

## **Toward the Establishment of National Strategy for Better Growing Environment to Promote Children's Vitality**

### **SUMMARY**

#### **1 Background**

Children in our country today are in a critical situation, which might be designated as "crisis of children." All age groups from infants to juveniles suffer not only declines in athletic competency and physical strength, increase in obesity and lifestyle-related diseases like diabetes and decline in the levels of academic achievement but also weakening of aspiration, increase in cases of refusal to go to school and shutting oneself up at home (*hikikomori*), disruption of school classes and bullying even leading to suicide. Maltreatment by parents is also increasing. A UNICEF report of child well-being presented data of a preeminently large proportion of children in our country agreeing with the statement 'I feel lonely' and giving a sign of little aspiration. This situation is attributable to changes in children's growth environment. For well-being of each child, it should be the responsibility of adults to promote children's vitality. At the same time, it should be a matter of a national first priority in that we are bringing up the next generation.

#### **2 Present status and problems**

Environment surrounding children of our country has been undergoing unparalleled and possibly ultramodern transfiguration in the world: motorization, loss of natural environment through urbanization, rapid development of advanced information-oriented society, women's social

participation, and changes in local community and family structures among others. Children in our country are exposed to electronic media in extremely long hours. Children's play space has kept on decreasing during the past forty years and it is now exceedingly small by international comparison. Children are deprived of opportunities for diverse experiences in the face of materialistic abundance. Deterioration in the "quality of children's growing environment" is serious. This is the very deterioration that causes decline in the physical, mental and other abilities of children and loss of their vitality.

### **3 Points of view**

Problems of children tend to have been regarded as those of medical care, welfare and education or those within a family and a school. However, changes in children's situation during the past forty years is largely attributable to material environment represented by "television" and "automobile" and this ultimately forms a vicious cycle involving four interwoven elements of children's growth environment, namely, "space," "method," "community" and "time." Improvement in children's situation today requires the enhancement of the quality of growing environment through the severance of the vicious cycle. For this purpose, strategy must be formulated from the point of view of children and their growth environment to reorganize present individual policies and programs into compound and comprehensive ones.

### **4 Proposals**

Our Committee proposes that the National Government together with related agencies first issue a declaration backed up with comprehensive strategy and then formulate and implement inclusive action-oriented strategy or action plan. It is also essential to elaborate cross-sectional organizational strategy for implementing the action-oriented strategy.

#### **(1) Comprehensive strategy**

It is of extreme importance in our country to realize growth environment to promote children's vitality. In recognition of this, the building of "Child-Friendly Nation" with a resolute commitment to promote children's vitality should be declared.

## **(2) Action-oriented strategy**

For the purpose of promoting children's vitality in our country, action-oriented strategy or action plan should be formulated and implemented to improve the "quality of growth environment" in terms of its four elements.

### **a) Re-development of children's growth environment**

Children in our country secure only extremely small amount of space for play and exercise, which restricts their free activities. Spaces for nature experiences are also insufficient. Their home range should be re-developed for the provision of comfortable places to stay, play spaces, agoras, nature spaces and others for diverse experiences.

### **b) Appropriate application and learning of hardware and software for children's growth**

Long exposure to electronic media or the like, especially poor ones, incurs deterioration in growth environment. Measures should be taken to enable children to use them in an appropriate manner as part of hardware and software for play and life. Children do not take over the know-how of outdoor play and activities in their substitution. Establishing a system of adults' support for children is indispensable.

### **c) Securing sound living hours for children's growth**

The living hours of children in our country are disordered, which is another cause of insufficient exercise, fatigue, shortage of sleep, etc. Long exposure to electronic media as well as adults' life is influential. Sound living hours should be secured for children through appropriate exposure to electronic media and adjustment of adults' life into a healthier pattern.

### **d) Reconstruction of the community for children's growth**

Opportunities for group experience leading to learning many things from friends are important. Healthy growing and learning of parents is necessary since the lifestyle of parents exercises an immeasurable influence on children's growth. Family, school and the local community constitute children's primary living environment, but they have lost their mutual relationships, which results in isolation of children as well as parents. It is necessary to increase adults' support for children's growth and to reconstruct relationships among family, school and the local community.

## **(3) Organizational strategy**

Effective implementation of the action-oriented strategy requires

strategy of another kind to deal with organization, that is, government organization on the one hand and an academic counterpart to support the former on the other.

a) Strengthening of cross-sectional policy formulation and implementation functions

In implementing the action-oriented strategy for children, Cabinet Office's capability should be strengthened. This is for effective liaison and coordination across ministries and agencies as well as policy and program management to allow the unified collection of data on children from each age group to cover wide-ranging policy fields and the continuous examination of the entire system of related policies and programs along with their effects.

b) Continuation of cross-sectional academic organization and study of indicators for children's vitality

Academic fields concerned with children so far are extremely manifold and they are specialized and individualized. Accordingly, an academic structure needs to be set up in the form of a continuing system. This is a structure for comprehensive monitoring of data pertaining to children's growth and for offering the government research-based practical proposals.

A set of indicators for comprehensive evaluation of children's vitality, not just academic achievement, also needs to be established.