

Lunch at school is a fun time for children. Before they start eating, they express their gratitude for the food and for those who made it.



Children harvesting rice. Growing and harvesting one's own food is an important part of food and nutrition education.

HEALTH & WELFARE

Fish and Meat dish (Meat, fish, egg, and soybean)

Grain dish (Rice, bread, noodles, and pasta)



Milk

Vegetable dish

This school lunch contains chestnut as a seasonal ingredient.

SCHOOL LUNCHES: THE KEY TO CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND PROSPERITY

The healthy growth of children in Japan owes much to the provision of nutritionally balanced school-lunch menus and a long standing commitment to nutrition education. Japan also offers school-lunch support internationally, leading to improved nutrition and higher quality learning.

When the morning lessons end, several students quickly change into white clothes and race down the hall as it is their turn to serve meals to their classmates at school lunch, a much-awaited time of the

day. Although everyone must eat without engaging in conversation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there are plenty of smiles around as the children take big bites of nutritious food prepared with seasonal ingredients.

Nutrition is essential to any child's healthy growth. While undernutrition is a deep-seated problem for those living in poverty, in recent years, many countries, regardless of their wealth, have faced complex issues, including overnutrition.

After World War II, Japan instituted school lunches to improve children's nutrition. This photo was taken in Tokyo in 1947.



To make progress toward solving that global problem, Japan will hold the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit 2021 in December. Today, more than a century since the founding of the National Institute of Nutrition in Tokyo in 1920, Japan expects to leverage its experience in nutritional policy to build international momentum surrounding better nutrition.

The three important pillars of Japan's nutritional policy are diet, specialists, and evidence. The policy recommends that meals consist of a balanced combination of staple dishes—such as rice or bread—that provide the body with energy, along with main dishes—such as meat, fish, or soybeans—that supply protein, and side dishes that deliver

vitamins and minerals. After World War II, Japan promptly eliminated nutritional deficiency with support from international organizations. The country's nutrition policy, developed in response to the malnutrition of its citizens, became the foundation for an expanding economy.

Japan's policy also focused on training of nutritional specialists including nutritional education and food-service management. Diet and nutrition teachers and dietitians play a key role in settings where school lunches are served. Most elementary schools in the country provide well-balanced school lunch menus devised by nutrition teachers and school nutritionists. These are based on national standards for nutritional intake in the implementation of school lunches, which are set according to the stage of a child's growth. Menus are also creatively devised to consider children's favorite foods.

NAKADA Tomoko, a member of the board of the Japan Dietetic Association, is a diet and nutrition teacher in Tochigi Prefecture. She says, "I take care to transform school-meal menus into learning materials. For example, if children learn in their home economics classes that traditional local cuisine is made by using ingredients in a

non-wasteful manner, they will be aware of the need to reduce food waste and will be more likely to finish their meals." Nakada makes it a point to impart children with appropriate knowledge through food and nutrition education. "A meal can have consequences for an individual's entire life span, starting with the time spent in the womb. Nothing gives me greater joy than to see children learn about nutrition through school lunches and grow into healthy adults."

Japan also helps introduce lunches at schools in other countries. For the children receiving those meals, the assistance not only improves their nutrition but also enhances the overall quality of their education.

For example, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has been aiding local communities in Madagascar

since 2017, helping them serve community-based school lunches to children. The assistance is part of the School for All project, which seeks to improve a learning environment in which parents and guardians take turns preparing school lunches. By 2019, the program had expanded to 146 schools. While nutritional deficiency is still a pressing issue for children in Madagascar, many can now get the meals they need from their school lunches, which boosts their motivation to learn. A fourth-grade teacher says, "The children can concentrate in class on days when we serve lunch. Community-school lunches clearly encourage them to attend school and participate in the various activities there."

The children unfailingly smile when they eat the school lunches that help them to grow and create happy memories. ●



JICA assistance helps local residents provide school meals in Madagascar. JICA

Diet and nutrition teacher NAKADA Tomoko finds joy in watching children eat happily.

