

Increasingly younger children have begun studying abroad

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The Yomiuri Shimbun Children are studying abroad at younger ages, due partly to growing interest in English education, with some parents accompanying their children on their overseas stay.

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Mothers and their babies attend an explanatory meeting at the Ryugaku Information Center in July.

There are various types of overseas study programs, most lasting for several weeks, in which parents take their babies and small children overseas, or in which elementary and junior high school students go overseas in groups during summer vacation.

English will become a subject at elementary schools from next fiscal year, and university entrance examinations will be changed. However, experts are divided over whether children should be taught English from an early age.

"I'll study abroad with my son. If he enjoys staying there, I want to go there with him again," said a 34-year-old homemaker living in Shinjuku Ward, Tokyo, holding her 10-month-old son in her arms. She attended an explanatory meeting held on July 9 by the Ryugaku Information Center, a Tokyo-based firm supporting overseas study.

Ten pairs of parents and children aged from 2 months to 5 years participated in the meeting. According to the firm, for a parent and child to study on the Philippine resort island of Cebu for two weeks costs about ¥250,000 to ¥350,000, excluding airfare and other costs.

Ryugaku Information Center said 242 families with children aged 15 or younger, including preschool infants, participated in this kind of program in 2018, about three times the previous year's figure. The number is expected to exceed 300 this year, it said.

The program has a good reputation among participants, according to the company. A 38-year-old woman who manages celebrities in Tokyo attended a language school on Cebu Island for two weeks with her 6- and 3-year-old sons in late February.

While the children took lessons from local instructors and sang English songs, she took private lessons in English conversation. "I think children pick up English more easily if they become familiar with it in their early years. It's also important to experience different cultures," she said.

There are no official statistics, but according to several companies that support overseas study, the number of people aged 15 or younger studying abroad has increased sharply in recent years. It's also popular

for elementary and junior high school students to study abroad in groups.

“The age of children studying abroad is notably falling, such as elementary school students who go abroad for a short stay, or parents studying abroad with their preschool infants. Some schools teach English to children of less than 1 year old with a babysitter,” said Tatsuhiko Hoshino, executive secretary of the Japan Association of Overseas Studies, which comprises 66 business operators that provide study abroad services.

The recent trend comes against a backdrop of educational reform emphasizing English.

English will become an official subject in the fifth grade of elementary school from the 2020 school year.

In 2021, the new Common Test for University Admissions will replace the National Center Test for University Admissions. Private-sector English proficiency tests such as the Test in Practical English Proficiency, known as Eiken, and the Global Test of English Communication, or GTEC, will be introduced to test English abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

“Learning English earlier is said to improve children’s English pronunciation, but children can significantly improve their pronunciation even from junior high school on,” said Nobuko Uchida, a professor of developmental psychology at International Pacific University. “It’s important to first develop the ability to think in one’s native language and the habit of learning by oneself.” Speech