

Guide  
Book

# Education for Children Living Across National Borders

What Parents  
Should Know



Public Interest Incorporated Foundation Niigata International Association

# Introduction

According to the Statistics on Foreign National Residents published by the Ministry of Justice in June 2020, there are 2,885,904 foreign residents in Japan. These foreign residents make up 2.3% of the general population, or in other words, approximately 2 in 100 residents are from other countries.

There are 18,309 foreign residents in Niigata, or approximately 0.8% of the general population of the prefecture (according to the Statistics on Foreign National Residents published by the Ministry of Justice in June 2020). Additionally, there are 224 children in Niigata public schools requiring instruction in Japanese as a second language regardless of nationality per MEXT's 2018 "Report on Preparations to Receive Children Requiring Instruction in the Japanese Language."

This handbook contains resources on things we would like you to know about educating your child or children in Japan. The information is aimed at parents planning to bring their child over from their home country to live in Japan, or parents whose families already living in Japan and those who support them. If you ever feel lost or have questions, this book should prove to be a valuable resource.

This handbook also contains some detailed information about child language development and some of the problems likely to occur as your child grow older.

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Niigata International Association

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# 1 For Children Moving to Japan

## (1) The Role of Parents

Even parents can struggle to adapt to living in another country. In many cases, children feel anxious about separating from the environments and friends they know and living a new life. One of the most important things you can do as a parent is to be aware that the anxiety and loss that your child may feel is not due to a problem in themselves, but rather a result of your decision. There are of course some parents who may choose to bring their child to Japan to help create a better environment for them. Some may also think that children would be happier to be living with their parents. However, children may not understand on the same level as their parents why the environment is better. Even children transferring between schools in their own country feel stressed – so please be understanding of how stressful it can be for your child to move to another country where they may not even speak the local language.

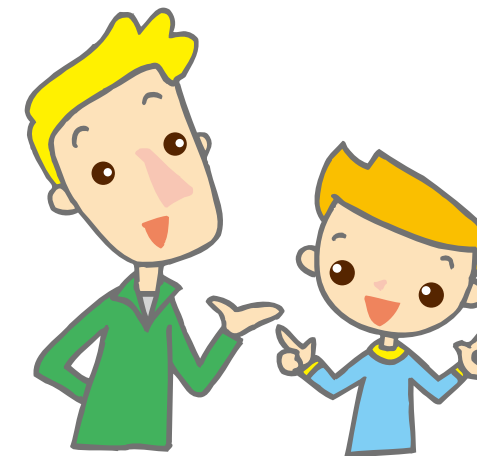
Children are more adaptable than adults, so if you create a safe space for your child in your home and give them adequate praise for their hard work in adjusting to Japan, they will likely adapt to living in Japan quickly.

Please do your best to keep up your child's native language. Books, including textbooks and dictionaries, will help your child to understand the materials in their classes while they learn Japanese.



## (2) Language in Children

While this may come as a surprise, forcing children to not use their native language in order to make them learn Japanese may have the opposite effect. Children in the lower grades of elementary school especially, who still do not have mastery of their native



language, will need to learn words and concepts in their native language in order to support their future study in Japanese. In other words, a second language must be developed on the base of a first language. If you or your spouse speaks Japanese natively, you can have the native Japanese speaker speak Japanese with your child and the speaker of their native language speak only their native language with your child, which will help solidify their native language and help the development and promotion of their second language. This will help your child learn to communicate in both languages.

Some Japanese people may laugh upon hearing foreigners pronounce Japanese words. In most cases, they do have not any ill-will, but may find the unusual differences funny. Those being laughed at, on the other hand, may feel hurt or angry. It may be best to talk with your child's teachers in advance and have the teachers explain to their students what behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable. For parents, before assigning blame, it is best to make sure your child is okay. Praise your child for doing their best, offer sympathy, and remind them there are others who appreciate their effort to speak Japanese. Help your child to understand others laughing may not intend to hurt them or bully them. It may be best to tell your child's teacher, with your child present, how your child felt. It is important for children to understand that adults are there to help them.

Some children may be cautious, and sit silently and listen without speaking until they are able to speak clearly. They may first only speak with friends, but they slowly will learn how to speak with anyone.



### (3) Home Language and School Language

Children up to elementary school age will pick up some language in their everyday environment without studying the way adults may need to in order to learn a language. It's important to remember that this will be limited to conversation (speaking and listening) in everyday environments. This is "home language." This language will be roughly comparable to the conversational language you might make with only the vocabulary and words covered in a beginning textbook.

On the other hand, very few children learn to read and write without instruction, and of course, even among adults, being able to read the letters or characters in words doesn't necessarily equate with being able to difficult books. The language necessary to do things such as study a school textbook, fill out official documents, or have a logical discussion is "school language."

In a child's home country, they will study school language at their language courses at school, through activities such as reading sentences about a variety of topics or writing reports on their own. Other school subjects also fulfill an important purpose in developing a child's school language by increasing their lexicon or having them read logical essays.

When first living in a foreign country, adults have a comparatively larger mastery of the school language in their native language than children do, so they can understand the grammar of a second language and read it to some extent, and many are able to pick up the school language in their second language in a short period of time with just a dictionary and a few other resources. Children, on the other hand, may not have completely mastered the school language in their native language, so helping them to develop school language in their second language is very important. For this reason, there are some children who struggle with studying in school despite being able to have a conversation just fine. In many cases, children who say they don't understand the material of their classes really mean that they don't understand the words in their classes or studies or that they can't follow the content their teacher or textbook presents. These children are struggling with their school language. Assuring your child develops school language in a way that works for them is important.

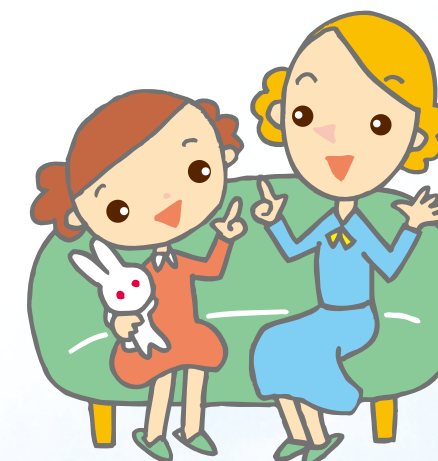


### (4) Adaptability in Children

For children to adapt to their community, they need a variety of relationships beyond those with their parents and teachers. We recommend helping your child to build relationships with the local community by doing things like having them greet the neighbors when they see them or inviting their friends over to your home. Many areas have a children's association or neighborhood association, where your child can enjoy not only fun activities such as walks, but also participate in helpful activities such as cleaning up the route to their school and get to know the people around them in the neighborhood. In places without one of these associations, your local community center (*kouminkan*) may have volunteer Japanese courses, an association for people from a certain country, or an interest group for a hobby. Your child may be able to make friends, and you will be able to hear about local events or information about nearby schools.

Parents can also show their desire for a positive life to their children through their feelings and attitude to encourage their children to proactively make new friends in Japan. Attending your child's school sports events and festivals will also have a positive effect.

There is no reason for you as a parent to act completely like a Japanese person. If you are married to someone from a different culture than you, do your best to help your child learn about culture from both of their parents so they can learn to be proud of all parts of their heritage.



# 2 Education in Japan

## (1) The Japanese School System

The Japanese school system is composed of six years of elementary school, three years of middle school, three years of high school or an equivalent school, and four years of college (or two-years of short-term college). Of these, elementary and middle school are considered compulsory education in which all students must enroll and graduate. While the compulsory requirement only applies to citizens of Japan, any child of foreign nationality residing in Japan between the ages of six and fifteen may enroll in an elementary or middle school for the same cost as a Japanese citizen if they desire to do so. Additionally, while not compulsory, most Japanese children attend a nursery, kindergarten, or another Certified Center for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) before beginning elementary school.

Most schools in Japan start in April and end in March. This period of one year beginning in April is the school year (*nendo*).

School classes are generally held from Monday to Friday, starting in the morning and ending in the afternoon. As a general rule, students are not permitted to leave school campuses during the day without permission.

## (2) Kindergarten, Nursery, and Certified Centers for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Children can learn skills necessary to work in groups and about Japanese culture and customs, such as the festivals in each season at a nursery, kindergarten, or ECEC. They can also learn Japanese more quickly and more enjoyably by playing with other children of their own age. In general, instructions given to children and communications to parents are in Japanese. While not compulsory, most children in Japan attend one of these before beginning elementary school.

Nurseries and ECECs can watch children who have not yet entered elementary school from morning until evening in the case that a parent gets sick, for example. Some places will accept children as young as two months old. That said, most will have conditions for entry and paperwork to complete. The cost will also be different depending on the parents' income, so please ask when completing the necessary procedures.

Children may attend kindergarten for 2-3 years before entering elementary school. These are generally from morning until afternoon. Some will have buses to pick up and drop off children. Since these are childcare facilities, the curriculum and cost may vary. There are both public and private facilities.

Among private nurseries, kindergartens, and ECECs, there are many operated by Christian churches and Buddhist temples. When you go to observe a facility before enrolling your child, please confirm what types of religious activities will be held, if any.

## (3) Elementary School

Children who will turn 7 years old between April 2nd of the year they enroll and April 1st of the next year are eligible to enroll in elementary school. A letter about the procedures for enrollment will arrive from the office of your municipality the year before your child can enroll. The procedures for enrollment will be in Japanese, so if there are sections you do not understand, please look over them with a Japanese speaker. You may also want to speak to the Board of Education in your municipality. If you do not receive materials related to enrollment by the end of the year before your child can enroll, please contact your Board of Education. In general, the public elementary school your child will attend is determined by where you live. If you have specific circumstances and want your child to attend another school instead (enrolling outside of your normal boundaries is called *ekkyou nyugaku*), please speak to the Board of Education both where you live and in the area you would like your child to go to school. There are some risks with having your child attend a different school, so please consider them in advance. In all cases, compulsory education classes and books are free, but other materials such as school supplies and school lunch must be paid for by the child's guardian. There will also be costs for field trips and other school trips. Some schools may also require your child to buy a specific gym uniform, shoes and hat. If your income is within a certain range, you may be able to receive some educational subsidies, so please speak with your child's teacher.

The school will determine which class your child is in and who their teacher will be. If your child has any type of disability and needs special support, there are schools with special education programs. Please check with the Board of Education in your local municipality if you have questions about these programs.

Elementary school is six years. There is almost no grade repetition in Japan — in other words, students are almost never “held back a year” in school. There is also no skipping of grades (jumping from Grade 1 to Grade 3 for example, or from Grade 4 to Grade 6). If your child does not understand Japanese, they may be able to start with students younger than them. If this is the case, please consult with the Board of Education in your local municipality.

- The Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) is a volunteer organization for parents and guardians of children that exists for most schools. Parents and guardians volunteer to help their children have a more fulfilling and positive experience at school.
- Most schools serve school lunch. Please look at the menu if your child has allergies or cannot eat certain foods for religious reasons. Children may bring boxed lunches from home.
- There is a time at schools almost every day where students assist with cleaning the school.



## (4) Middle School

Children who will turn 13 between April 2nd of the year they enroll and April 1st of the next year are eligible to enroll in middle school. There is no exam to enter a middle school operated by and determined by the municipality you live in. However, there may be some other middle schools in your area that do require passing an entrance exam. Middle school education is also compulsory, so classes and schoolbooks are free, but other school supplies, workbooks, mock high school entrance exams, school trips, and field trips are paid for by the parent or guardian of the student. Your child may also need to buy a school uniform, school bag, and gym clothes before beginning school. If your income is within a certain range, you may be able to receive some educational subsidies, so please speak with your child's teacher. In addition to this, if your child joins a school club or sport, there may be charges for uniforms or other equipment.

Studies will become more difficult in middle school, so students will need to study hard for high school entrance exams. Children who have difficulty with Japanese will not be able to score as high as they might like, which can have a great impact on their self-confidence. Please take into consideration how difficult it can be to take a test in a language you do not know or study curriculum you have never seen before.

If your child has come recently from abroad, you may wish to have them step down one year and enter school from 6th grade. Please consider this decision carefully, consult with your local Board of Education, and seek feedback from your child and from those who have done it before.

There are two school exams each school session in Japan (midterm exams and final exams). Students' grades in each subject are determined by their classroom behavior (such as their attitude and how consistently they have turned in homework), quizzes and tests, and these exams. Report cards (*tsuchiho*) issued at the end of each school session become the basis of a student's school report (*chosasho*). During entrance exams, students will have pencil-and-paper tests and interviews, but their school report will also be viewed. Students intending to continue to high school should work hard throughout the exam period in as many subjects as they can. If your child can read but not write, talk to their teacher about accommodations such as having a teacher read the problems aloud in a separate room where the student can answer out loud or having the teacher add furigana to the kanji on the test.

- Many students have club activities after school or attend cram schools (*juku*).
- Students will have a different teacher for each subject and will be required to study more than in middle school.
- There will be uniforms and school rules. If students must wear something in violation of the normal dress code for religious reasons, please speak with the school about what to do.
- There are schools with school lunch and schools where students must bring their own lunch.

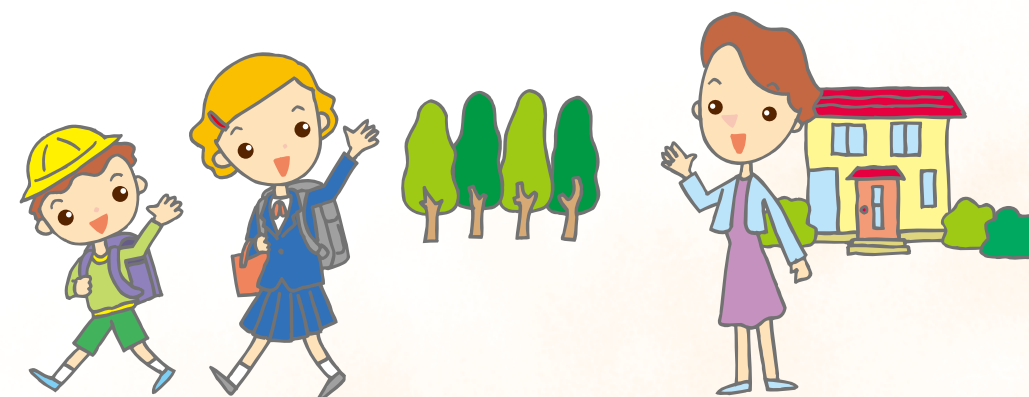
## (5) Children Not Attending Public Elementary or Middle Schools

In Japan, six years of elementary school and three years of middle school are compulsory education, and many other countries around the world have around 10 years of compulsory education. It is believed around the world that children have the right to an education. As a parent, you should make sure your child also learns whatever curriculum would be covered in compulsory education in your home country. Parents who do not send their children to school and opt to homeschool or have a home tutor must ensure their children receive a complete education in their home.

Because almost all children in Japan go to school, children who become adults without attending school often feel like they have been put into a problematic situation. Unfortunately, some young children end up not attending school due to a variety of issues, such as bullying. Do your best to create an environment for your child to ensure they can continue to study, even if it is difficult.

If you choose to homeschool your child, make sure your child learns conversation, reading, and writing in Japanese, as well as appropriate materials in their native language.

Studying is not the only important part of school – children must also learn how to interact with each other. Your child may attend a public elementary or middle school even if they do not speak Japanese. Even if your child cannot attend every day, consult with the school and your local Board of Education. Your child may be able to attend once a week, or study in a separate classroom in the school.



## (6) High School Entrance Exams

In Japan, 98% of students continue to high school after graduating middle school. Public schools – schools operated by the prefecture (*kenritsu*) and schools operated by the city (*shiritsu*) – generally have entrance exams covering five topics: Japanese (not only modern Japanese reading and kanji, but also historical texts), English, mathematics, science, and social studies. As a rule, your child cannot take the entrance exam for more than one public high school. (In the case that a public high school does not have enough students after the exam, students who were not accepted to another high school may apply a second time. However, your child's desired school may not have room for any more students this way.)



Even if your child can speak Japanese in daily conversation, the questions about social science and Japanese on the entrance exam will be difficult if they don't have around the level of Japanese necessary to read a newspaper. There are also written problems that will need to be answered in written Japanese, and students are not allowed dictionaries for the exam. Even the questions about English are written in Japanese, and they include translation questions. Even if your child is a native English speaker, they will find it difficult to get a high score on this test without understanding Japanese.

Niigata's public schools have a system (the Overseas Returnee Student Special Selection or *kaigai kikokuseitotou tokubetsu senbatsu*) where students who have arrived from another country or returned home to Japan in the last two years may take a simplified exam in math, English, and Japanese composition and have an interview. If you would like your child to take this exam, please speak with their middle school teacher in advance.

Private schools may also have different or unique exams. Japanese, math, and English tests and an interview is the most common set of exams. Some schools' base acceptance on only a student's grades in middle school and an interview. Some determine it based only on an interview and an essay. Some schools will give priority to students who do not take entrance exams at any other schools (many schools call this *sengan* or *tangan*). Some schools offer priority to students who performed well in sports or other categories. The tuition at these schools will vary, but in general it is higher than public schools.

## (7) High School

Attending high school in Japan is not compulsory, but almost all students enter high school. It is very difficult to find a job with only a middle school education, and most of the jobs available will have low wages. For those who would like to continue on to a college or trade school, graduating from high school (12 years of school total in Japan and/or another country) is the best plan.

Currently, there is little instruction for students learning Japanese, and students learning Japanese take the same exams as their classmates. This can result in low grades, which can potentially result in repeating a year in school.

Some children in this situation react to not being able to follow their class's curriculum by acting out or misbehaving in other ways. This can result in other disciplinary action, or in the worst cases, expulsion. It is very difficult to enter any higher education institute (including a trade school) in Japan without graduating from high school.

Most schools have multiple "courses," or sets of curriculum that students choose to study when enrolling. In addition to a regular course (which contains more advanced versions of subjects from the middle school curriculum), many schools have other courses where students can gain knowledge and skills for specialized careers. There are also schools called *sougoukakkou*, where students can pick their own courses and schedule.

High schools also have a variety of school schedules, such as full-time schools from 8a.m. to 4p.m. every day, and part-time schools with classes only in the morning or only in the evening so students can work in their off hours. Part-time schools have fewer classes per day, so it may take more than 3 years to graduate. There are also correspondence and individual schools, where students can cover material at their own pace until they graduate.

Students transferring from one high school to another take a "transfer entrance exam." For public high schools, please talk to the Board of Education where the school is located to find out whether or not this exam is available, when it will be held, what subjects it covers, and any other important details. For private high schools, please contact the school directly for this information.

It may be difficult to contact a Japanese high school or Board of Education from outside of Japan. If you are currently outside of Japan, it may be easier to have someone you know in Japan do this for you. Please make sure you have information such as how long it will take your child to get from home to school and how much the tuition is. International schools tend to be expensive and generally are only in large cities. Ethnic schools are only available in a few cities. If you already live in Japan or have determined where you will be living, you can call the Board of Education for your area to get information about what high schools are available and what procedures would be required for your child to enter.

- Only a few schools in Japan offer instruction for Japanese learners.
- There are full-time, part-time, and correspondence schools.
- Repeating a year and expulsion are disciplinary measures that exist in Japan.



## (8) Entering Japanese School At 16 or Older

Some children come to Japan partway through high school in their home country, or alternatively do not enter high school in their home country and come to Japan at age 16 or 17 (a few years after graduating middle school). In either of these cases, it may be difficult to enter school immediately after arriving in Japan. A student may not transfer into a Japanese high school until they have taken the transfer entrance exam or the traditional high school entrance exam between January and March. In general, students who have graduated middle school in another country may not enroll in a Japanese middle school, so until your child has passed one of these exams, they may not enroll in any Japanese school. In the case where your child cannot attend school, they can prepare for the exams by attending Japanese classes (many of which are organized by volunteers) or participating in local study groups. Some students study Japanese at a language school or take Japanese courses online from home. If the period between when a student arrives in Japan and must take entrance exams is short, they will need to study as much Japanese as they can before arriving and confirm they have a good understanding of the math and English taught in Japanese middle schools.

Students who had good grades in high school might also be able to enroll in a Japanese school as a foreign exchange student on a student visa. There are also entrance exams for college in Japan, but foreign exchange students and returnees (Japanese children who have spent extended amounts of time abroad) often have different exams, and many schools have programs specifically designed for exchange students.

In any case, if it has already been determined that your child will be coming to Japan, please make sure they can read basic hiragana and katakana before arriving. If they would like to return to your home country for university, they will need to prove they have graduated high school in some country (in most countries this means finishing 12 years of school).

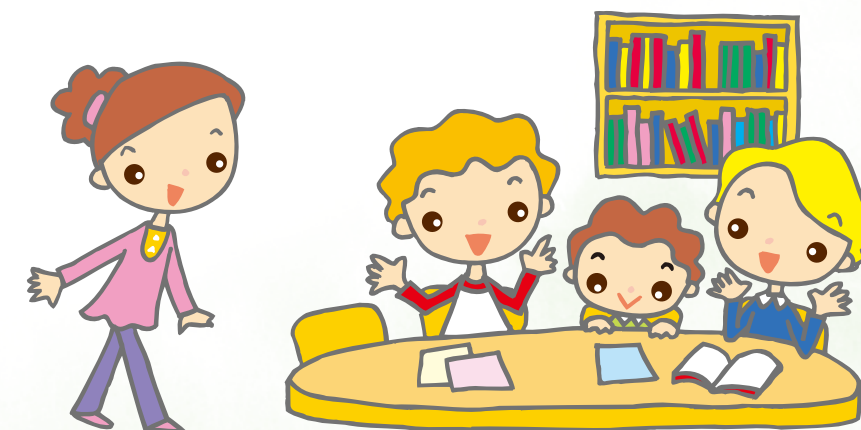
# 3 Enjoying Life in Japan

## (1) Finding an International Association or Volunteer Japanese Class in Your Area

Many municipalities have an international association. These associations help to connect people from other countries with locals. They may have information about local Japanese classes or help parents enroll their children in school. They often consult with foreign residents about life in Japan. Your local international association is a great place to ask questions.

If there is a Japanese class in your area, you may be able to contact them and attend once as a trial. Because many of these classes are run by volunteers, the times, dates, and places will change depending on where you live. It is best to contact them in advance to make sure you have current information.

Attending local international exchange events is another good way to get involved in your community. You will find people not only from Japan, but from countries all over the world.





## (2) Try to Move After Finding a School

If you are still deciding where to live in Japan, please take into account what you would like to do for your child's schooling.

Niigata compared to larger cities like Osaka or Tokyo has weaker public transportation infrastructure, and the snow in the winter makes moving around the city difficult. Schools continue in the winter as normal except in blizzard or typhoon conditions, so please consider living somewhere that will make it easy for your child to get to school.

There are some schools in less populated areas with only around 10 students total, and in these cases, students of different school years will all study in one class (this system is called *fukushiki-gakkyuu*). Students wishing to study something else outside of school may not have access to somewhere to study locally. In large cities, on the other hand, there are many students and crowded classrooms. Many of these schools are highly competitive or have strict rules.

School curriculum in Japan is determined by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and schools in the same municipality will have the same textbooks, regardless of size. Teachers also transfer between schools every few years.

The lifestyles of children will also change with their environment. There are some areas where parents feel students should be attending cram schools after school to study, and some areas where parents feel their students should be hanging out with their friends. This will also change with the age of children. If your child is younger, it may be a priority that your child can play safely, but in middle school your child's path to high school may also be on your mind.

Your child's public elementary and middle school will be determined by where you live, so it may be best to figure out which school would be most suited to your child and then move to an address within that school's boundaries.

## (3) Disaster Preparedness

Japan experiences a relatively high number of earthquakes. Sometimes, there are large earthquakes that seem like they could demolish houses. Earthquakes also can cause tsunamis.

Japanese schools have a number of emergency drills each year. Because practicing what to do in the case of a disaster like an earthquake or fire is important, your child will also be required to participate in these drills. There may also be disaster drills for your area that you can attend as a family.

## (4) Putting Up Your "Antennae" in Your Community

Adults can help to build their community regardless of where they are from or where they live. Working in the community or helping to raise your child are only some of the important ways you can help your local community. You may find people who have different opinions than you, but remember that a variety of opinions is a result of a vibrant and open society. Meeting others outside of your home and workplace will help you to learn more about yourself.

Foreign residents of Japan do not have the right to vote or hold elected office, and there are some types of jobs they may not have, but they are still required to pay taxes and are still important residents of the areas they live in. Actively participating in your local municipalities.

## (5) The Foreign Resident Consultation Center of Niigata

The Niigata Prefectural Government operates the Foreign Resident Consultation Center of Niigata, where you can consult about a variety of topics for free. Seven languages are handled by interpreters, and a total of 74 languages are available with the help of a translation application. There is no need to struggle alone, the Center is here to help.

- Consultation Topics: All types of basic living questions and information related to visa types (zairyu shikaku), jobs, education, healthcare, welfare

(Please note that the Center does not do translation or interpretation of official documents for personal or business purposes.)

- Consultation Method: In person, by phone, or by email (Appointments are not necessary and consultations are free)

Address: Niigata-shi, Chuo-ku, Bandaijima 5-1 Bandaijima Bldg. 2nd Floor

Telephone: 025-241-1881 Email: nia10@mniigata-ia.or.jp

- Consultation Hours: Monday-Friday, 10:00-17:00 (Reception for consultations closes at 16:30)

- Interpretation Hours

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Japanese	10:00~17:00	10:00~17:00	10:00~17:00	10:00~17:00	10:00~17:00
Chinese			10:00~17:00		
English	10:00~14:00			10:00~14:00	10:00~17:00
Tagalog	10:00~14:00				
Thai		10:00~17:00			
Vietnamese		10:00~16:00			
Spanish				10:00~14:00	
Portuguese				10:00~14:00	
Other Languages	10:00~17:00 through use of interpretation software				

- A specialist in each of the following fields will be available on the following days:

- Education Consultations: Every Tuesday 10:00-17:00 (Japanese, Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese)
- Administrative Scrivener (*Gyousei-shoshi*) Consultations: 4th Wednesday of the month 10:00-17:00 (Japanese, Chinese)
- Immigration Consultations: 2nd Tuesday of the Month 13:00-17:00 (Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese)
- Legal Consultations: 3rd Thursday of Odd-Numbered Months 13:00-17:00

(Japanese, English, Spanish, Portuguese)

(All dates subject to change)



Face book

## (6) Other Contact Information

- ◆ For inquiries about Niigata's public elementary and middle schools, please contact the Board of Education in your municipality.

- ◆ For inquiries about Niigata's public high schools:

Niigata Prefectural Board of Education, High School Education Division

Telephone: 025-280-5611 Fax: 025-285-7998

- ◆ For questions about private high schools, please contact the school directly.

- ◆ For information about Japanese classes, please contact your local international association:

- Niigata City International Exchange Foundation

Telephone: 025-225-2727

- Kashiwazaki Area International Association

Telephone: 0257-32-1477

- Nagaoka International Affairs Center Chikyu Hiroba

Telephone: 0258-39-2714

- Joetsu International Network

Telephone: 025-527-3615

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