Hikikomori and School Refusal
by Lindsey Saunders

Life in Japanese schools can be a horrid experience. Bullying, entrance exams, and constant peer pressure are just some problems that children face. This could be said of schoolchildren in different countries as well, but the children in Japan have a unique response to school related pressure. This manifests in an interesting phenomenon called hikikomori. You may have heard this word from the news, due to some of the most extreme cases. The general definition of hikikomori is “those that shut themselves in their rooms”, or another part of their house, and refuse to come out no matter what for at least 6 months. However, what you may not realize is that most hikikomori are lethargic rather than violent. They feel they wouldn’t be able to handle failure in Japan’s success-oriented society. In most cases they may not have to because of the large dependency on parents. Another problem that occurs in Japan is the student refusing to attend school and is called school refusal, or toukoukyohi, which could lead to hikikomori. However, it is usually just centered on school, with students being either afraid to go or just lacking the energy to keep up with the high-paced education system.

In Japan, school is considered a fundamental part of society, and many students and the population in general believe that if you can make good grades and get into a good school, the rest of your life will work out wonderfully. This applies a ridiculous amount of pressure to students, causing anxiety and self-doubt. Because school is such an integral part of Japanese life, school refusal is often discussed among adults and usually turns into more of a political issue because of opposing views on educational methods and curriculum. The problem, whether it lies with the individual students or the school system itself, is highly debated (Yoneyama, 2000, p. 81).

In these debates, school phobia is broken up into four different categories: 1) psychiatric, as mental illness – the student is blamed rather than the school and the children are sent for medical help and labeled as ‘abnormal’, 2) behavioral, as laziness – the student’s own selfishness is the cause and more discipline is needed, 3) citizen’s discourse, as resistance – higher authorities feel the problem is not with the students but with the schools and society in general, which calls for higher political change, 4) and the socio-medical discourse, as burnout – the problem lies with the school’s societal structure, and urges children to rest when academic demands and high pressure social situations cause them to panic (Yoneyama, 2000).

Many cases of hikikomori in fact start out as school refusal, or toukoukyohi. Those afflicted with toukoukyohi, whatever the cause, often show signs of exhaustion and also panic attacks or anxiety disorder. Toukoukyohi is often related to school phobia, which includes fear of going to school, emotional disturbance, and being in the safety of parents (Yoneyama, 2000). However, many school refusals result from academic burnout on the part of the student. These students lack the desire to continue down what is seen as an impossible path.

Tomohiro Itsuno states that as for toukoukyohi, the usual precursor to hikikomori, several factors are probably to blame. He differentiates between family and school problems. Family problems include advanced home technology taking away from the domestic training that usually comes from parents to children. This denies children the parental bond that develops through such training. Another possibility could be the shrinking size of Japanese families – children don’t experience the sharing and relating that comes with siblings. Because of this the social persona develops later than normal. Also, the Japanese family is centered around the child, relating the message that the parents are only there to serve the child and therefore the child doesn’t feel any responsibility. This can also cause a co-dependant relationship between mother and child. Trauma may occur when separation actually happens, as in becoming a shakaijin, or a member of society (Itsuno, 1993).

In relation to school refusal, Tomohiro mentions the largest cause being poor academic results and blames the schools for trying to cram large amounts of specific information in children’s minds. Also, the ‘equality of outcome’ is stated. In Japan, equality is one of the most important aspects of education, and unlike America’s view of equality of opportunity, Japan focuses on the equality of everyone’s outcomes (Okamoto, 2001). This puts a lot of pressure on young children, not only to strive to reach everyone else’s level, but also preventing those exceptional children from revealing their full potential.
outside with their families, with other children, and with the community, and thus learned the majority of their moral and social education in this way. Today, however, community activity is lower, while sedentary activities and the likelihood of both parents working full-time are higher (Cave, 2001).

The rate of children refusing to attend school has doubled since 1990 (Jones, 2006). From a report written by the Ministry of Education in 1990, there were almost 50,000 students from elementary and secondary schools that hadn’t attended in at least 50 days. Of those in secondary school, 30% claimed it was lack of spirit or dislike of school; 26% stated anxiety disorders as the cause; and 20% were from misconduct and the pursuit of pleasure (Itsun, 1993).

Students with school refusal usually start out by claiming they cannot go to school, usually because they feel excessive tiredness. However, often times they aren’t really sure why they can’t bring themselves to go to school (Yoneyama, 2000, p. 87). Many school refusals start after a period of going to the school clinic, where students are allowed to be at school but without any of the pressures of normal class. After this, there is usually great pressure put on the student to go back to school, and symptoms like stomachache or headache begin to appear. Sometimes violence against parents by the student occurs in response to the pressure put on them. After this, sometimes for large amounts of time, the students process their situation, and usually comes to the conclusion that they are not in school not because there is something wrong with them, but because they don’t like it, and are able to criticize the school system in their minds and assert themselves. Finally, some find self-confidence and are able to live in society again, but feel that school was a bad thing, that took away their personality (Yoneyama, 2000). However, not all students end up this way – some sink further into hikikomori, complete detachment from society, and some commit suicide or resort to crime against others.

There are a few accepted ideas of what could be causing hikikomori. The Ministry of Education’s list of causes for school refusal are as follows: neurotic emotional confusion; mental disorder, as in the early states of depression or schizophrenia; poor academic performance; mental or emotional disabilities; maladjustment from transferring schools; and a lack of valuing education (Itsun, 1993). The reasons listed are wide and varied, but many of them could be accredited to social pressure or lack of parental involvement.

In Japanese society, it is very common for children to live with their parents until they get married, even when the child is out of college with a full-time job. The habit of relying on parents could be one reason hikikomori is possible for those with social problems. Dr. Saito claims that hikikomori is a family and social disease, based largely on the child-parent dependent relationship and the amount of pressure that is placed on young males, and to a lesser extent females, to succeed in Japanese society. Mariko Fujiwara, the director of research at Hakuhodo Institute of Life and Living in Tokyo, says that today’s parents are more demanding because Japan’s declining birth rate means they have fewer children on whom to push their hopes (Jones, 2006). A Japanese teacher who had a student stop going to school also claimed this was a problem, saying that “[the mother] hoped for too much from when [the child] was born. She thought high expectations equaled love” (LeTendre, 1996). An American psychologist, Dr. David Kupfer, states that, “In Japan, the pressure to succeed is a unique cultural source of trauma” (Kary, 2003).

Another psychologist, Yuichi Hattori, M.A., claims the problem is unemotional parenting. Most of his patients haven’t been physically or sexually abused, but they seem to have post-traumatic stress disorder, and he thinks it’s from ‘zombie’-like parents. This relates to the Japanese ideal of honne and tatemae – true feelings vs. outward actions – which is one of the cornerstones of Japanese society (Kary, 2003).

Most hikikomori experience depression and obsessive-compulsive disorders; however, this is usually a side-effect of being shut-in with no human contact rather than a cause for isolation (Jones, 2006). There are similarities to agoraphobia and other mental illness, but hikikomori usually act normal unless they are placed in a stressful situation (Watts, 2002). It is said that hikikomori usually have a narcissist nature, preventing them from being able to fail in public because their pride is too high (Ogino, 2004).

Many hikikomori claim it was bullying in school that led them to isolate themselves, reasons ranging from being too fat to too shy to even being better than everyone else at a sport or hobby (Jones, 2006). Again, this relates to the ‘equality of outcome’ mentioned earlier. Outliers, even those on the exceptional end, are treated as alien. When students seek help most students are told by their parents and teachers to handle bullying themselves.

Another aspect of recent Japanese life that could hinder those that are predisposed to hikikomori is advanced technology. Countless hours can be spent on the Internet or playing video games while having
food delivered directly to your door, and rich parents
usually allow this kind of behavior to continue
instead of acknowledging that there’s a problem
(Watts, 2002). The pressure of Japanese society to
succeed is also not to be overlooked. About 10 years
ago there was another cultural disease that occurred
in Japan: karoshi, or death by overwork (Watts, 2002).
Perhaps the Japanese youth find this level of success
to be too much to live up to, and become apathetic as
defense mechanism.

Sometimes hikikomori is due to an extreme
obsession with video games, anime, or some other
hobby; sometimes the person simply turns into a
near vegetable, hardly bathing or eating, just passing
the time silently in isolation. Of course this doesn’t
happen only to school age people – it also happens
to corporate workers, housewives, and others – but
it’s primarily a 16-25 year old trend. Around 80% of
hikikomori are male (Jones, 2006). 40% are below
the age of 21 (Kary, 2003). 21% are within 25-30 years old,
and about 8% of hikikomori haven’t been in public for
more than a decade (Watts, 2002). The first outbreak
of hikikomori cases happened in the mid-1980’s when a
doctor who now specializes in hikikomori, Dr. Tamaki
Saito, began getting a lot of young male patients who
spent most of the time in their rooms, “lethargic and
uncommunicative” (Jones, 2006).

It is estimated that maybe 1% of Japanese are
hikikomori (about 1 million), which should cause
a great deal of concern. But considering this is a
fairly recent phenomenon, the government has only
recently begun studies of this societal withdrawal by
its young people (Watts, 2002). Also, the older one
gets, the less likely they will re-enter society, which is
alarming considering the low birth rate in Japan. This
leaves the question of what will happen to hikikomori
when their parents die. Almost all hikikomori are
supported by parents who feel an obligation to
support their child no matter what. Also, in a society
where being different is considered to be reckless and
is generally shunned these parents are usually deathly
afraid that others will find out about their child’s
problem (Jones, 2006).

Because hikikomori is a ‘private’ disease, receiving
help is difficult. First, public health care usually does
not work because the psychologist or doctor ends
up talking to only members of the family. It seems
that only those hikikomori who want to change can
do it. But for these people, help is available. Besides
private counseling and therapy, there is a job-training
program called New Start, a college-like setting that
reintroduces normal life to those who have been shut
in for long periods of time (Barr, 2000).

There are also several private alternative schools.

One deals specifically with hikikomori in a group
setting. This school introduces activities slowly to
allow hikikomori to try new things by helping them
to develop ‘managing categorization.’ In this private
program, as most others, communication starts by a
worker or volunteer going to the affected hikikomori’s
house. Often, this volunteer has to go for several
months repeatedly until valid communication is
made. The person is told that there is a place for them
to visit or even live and recuperate if they decide they
want that. The visits continue until the withdrawn
person decides to participate, or continuously refuses
any outside assistance.

If they do decide to try it, it’s very difficult. At
first they are allowed to be in a room by themselves,
or sit in the corner of a room and simply listen to
other’s conversations. Gradually they can work up
to small conversations with the staff about things
they like and grow from there. But usually it’s a very
slow, unsteady progress. However, because hikikomori
can talk to others with the same affliction, they can
support and encourage each other.

The ‘managing categorization’ refers to the
practical lack of titles or categories in private centers
such as these. Past successes or failures are not
mentioned, and any terms of disease or mental illness
are mostly unused. Members of the staff also do not
distinguish themselves from the hikikomori, and are,
for the most part, unlicensed. Because of this, those
that attend don’t feel as if they’re in an abnormal
setting and can ease back into society. Also, hikikomori
are not divided among level of recuperation or age,
so they can move freely wherever they want and not
feel restricted. ‘Managing categorization’ is not meant
as an effective treatment, but more as a gateway to
become comfortable in social settings (Ogino, 2004).

As far as school refusal goes, Tomohiro claims
that counseling must become available for the
children, as well as a pact between the different levels
of school to focus on nurturing the student’s minds.
There must be a guidance system with joint effort
between different schools (Itsun, 1993).

The media has a large hand in educating
the rest of the world about Japan’s school problems,
including hikikomori. The media has blown this issue
out of proportion, when you consider the ratio of
successful students to the ones mentioned in the
news. However, because of the sheer volume of
students attending school in Japan, hikikomori is
considered a problem that needs to be corrected in the
school system. In ‘Educational Reform in Japan’, the
author claims that it is the recent school reform’s fault,
that the Japanese education system is too strict and
applies too much pressure on students – therefore,
another reform is necessary, this time centered on the students needs as opposed to the academic results. In 1998 the Ministry of Education released a statement admitting problems in education: “...in Japan, education has tended to fall into the trap of cramming knowledge into children, while the ability to learn and think for oneself has been neglected” (Cave, 2001).

There have been rare, but extreme cases of hikikomori committing rash acts of violence. This, in turn, causes the public, even in Japan, to have an unjustified fear of those afflicted with hikikomori, further reducing the chance that help will be sought (Larimer, 2000). However, most hikikomori are too lethargic and apathetic to commit violence against anyone, including themselves (Jones, 2006).

So does the problem of hikikomori and school refusal lie with the family, the school, or society? It seems to be that all three are contributing factors to students distancing themselves from society. However, the enabling attitude of the family is by far the biggest reason behavior like this continues for long periods of time. The values of giving and caring to the extreme have in fact made Japan a society of enablers. The desire to keep private life and failures private is another reason that correcting hikikomori is difficult. Is hikikomori and school refusal just a symptom of a larger problem within the school system and Japanese society itself? If this is the case, these kinds of problems will most definitely continue, until the government, the school system, and hopefully, parents take more drastic measures.

REFERENCES


