

# Assessment Process Followed by Elementary School Teachers in Japan for Assessing the Support Needs of Children of Parents with Cancer : A semi-structured interview

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## Background & Aim

Children of parents with cancer are often affected physically, psychologically, and socially. School teachers are close observers of children's behavior and emotional stability. Their awareness and judgment are crucial for detecting changes early and linking children to appropriate support. However, the role of school teachers in recognizing these signs and the process by which they determine the need of support remain largely unexplored, particularly in Japan.

**This study aimed to identify the process by which elementary school teachers in Japan assess support needs of children whose parents have cancer.**

This study significantly contributes to the development of school-based support for these children.

## Methods

**Study design:** Qualitative study

**Survey period:** December 2024 to June 2025

**Participants:** This study used purposive sampling and included elementary school teachers working at public schools in **Akita City** who had experience supporting children with parents with cancer.

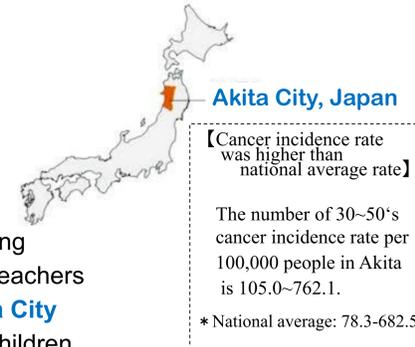
**Survey:** One-on-one interviews were conducted online according to the participants' preferences, with each interview lasting approximately 40–60 min.

**Demographic data:** Age, years of teaching experience, position, personal or family experience with cancer, experience in cancer education, and number of cases in which they provided support to children with parents with cancer.

### The semi-structured interview guide:

- "In what situation did you first feel that 'support might be needed' for children with parents with cancer, and what aspects of the children's condition or changes were most striking at that time?"
- "What were the decisive reasons or contextual factors for considering the necessity of support? Please describe any emotions or hesitations you felt at that time."
- "How did you, as a teacher, interpret any discomfort or signs you noticed while interacting with the children?"

**Analysis:** Colaizzi's phenomenological method.



## Results

**Table 1. Participant Characteristics (N = 24)**

Category	Details	Number (%)	Median
Position	Homeroom teacher	22 (91.7)	
	Assistant teacher	2 (8.3)	
Gender	Female	17 (70.8)	
	Male	7 (29.2)	
Age (median)			45.5 years (range: 32–62)
Years of teaching experience			20 years (range: 5–38)
Experience providing cancer education	Yes	2 (8.3)	
	No	22 (91.7)	
Personal or family cancer experience	Yes	12 (50.0)	
	No	12 (50.0)	
Number of support experiences			2 cases (range: 1–4)

**Table 2. Assessment process used by elementary school teachers to determine the necessity of support for children whose parents had cancer**

Category	Subcategory
Noticing changes in children	<b>Emergence of physical symptoms</b> "When I was a first-grade homeroom teacher, one child all of a sudden began saying every morning, 'My stomach hurts.' But when they went to the school nurse, nothing seemed wrong.... I felt that something was off. Later I heard, 'My mom is in the hospital,' and then it all made sense."
	<b>Disruptions in behavioral patterns</b> "This child used to be really reliable, but all of a sudden, started forgetting things a lot. That's when I first thought, something's different."
	<b>Fragmented verbal expressions</b> "One day, the child suddenly told me, 'My mom's hair fell out.' But they did not say anything more.... I felt like they wanted to tell me but couldn't say it all."
	<b>Changes in peer relationships</b> "Another student told me, 'That child hasn't been in the classroom much lately,' and that's how I finally noticed."
	<b>Fluctuations in emotional expression</b> "There was this sixth-grade boy, usually calm, but he suddenly started getting angry over little things.... That's when I began responding together with the homeroom teacher."
Interpreting those changes and experiencing wavering judgments	<b>Observational judgment of transient versus persistent changes</b> "Kids often say, 'My stomach hurts,' but this child would complain at the same time every single day. It became like a routine, and I started to think that maybe this is more psychological."
	<b>Between speculation and certainty regarding family circumstances</b> "From the child's words and behavior, I kind of felt that something difficult might be going on at home. But without anything definite, I hesitated to ask, and I was really torn about it."
	<b>Determining the timing of support initiation</b> "I am always torn about whether I should talk to the child or keep watching a little longer. I wonder when the right time is. I know I shouldn't rush it."
Regulating emotional conflicts that hinder the provision of support	<b>Desire to wait for children's disclosure</b> "Even if it is a child who cries a lot, I wait until they show some sign that they want to say something themselves. If I get the timing wrong, I feel like it could actually break the trust."
	<b>Hesitation to intrude into family matters</b> "When it comes to things at home, I naturally become very cautious. I struggle with how much I should ask. Especially with illness, the child and the parent might not want me to touch on it at all."
	<b>Cautiousness about interventions and awareness of responsibilities</b> "I always worry that even a small word of encouragement might become pressure for the child or that the parents might feel I'm interfering unnecessarily."
Recognizing and reaffirming the role of teachers as educators in the provision of support	<b>Awareness as a trusted recipient within relationships of trust</b> "When a child said, 'This is just between us,' I thought, 'Wow, this child is really trying hard.' Sharing something like that is not easy at all."
	<b>Supportive perspective of monitoring children's changes in daily life</b> "Saying a few words, watching their facial expressions—those small things, one after another, are what I see as the first step in providing support."
	<b>Recognizing the limits of teachers and expectations for collaboration</b> "After listening to a child, I do not feel secure acting only on my own judgment. So I try to move forward by sharing information with other teachers."

## Discussion & Conclusion

**Close collaboration between schools and health care professionals is essential to provide timely and effective support for children of parents with cancer.**

- Decision-making in schools regarding support for children of parents with cancer is **highly complex**, indicating the need for structured approaches.
- Teachers' daily observations and insights can serve as **valuable information** for the broader health care team.
- Close collaboration** between schools and health care professionals may improve the quality of support

### Ethical considerations and conflicts of interest

This study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of Akita University (No. 3112).

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