

Venturing into the Local:
The Effect of Japanese Parenting Organizations on Men's Community Engagement
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Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork and interviews that I conducted over 12 months at nonprofit and local community organizations focused on fathering in the Greater Tokyo Area, my research analyzes how contemporary Japanese fathers seek alternative spaces where they can learn about parenting, form connections with other parents, and involve themselves in local activities. These relationships, facilitated by the men's socially defined status as parents, appeal to individuals for whom the workplace would otherwise serve as the center of social life. Particularly attractive is the possibility of free association with others who participate in these organizations; this opportunity contrasts with the mandatory nature of workplace relationships in most Japanese companies. However, the effects on local engagement by Japanese fathers vary for each type of nonprofit or community organization focused on fathering. While regional and national fathering groups serve as primary sources of values that reinforce men's convictions about the importance of family and community, neighborhood-based fathering groups empower men to involve themselves in their communities through locally organized group programs. Men's presence in their children's schools and in "papa circles" and "papa associations" renders them visible, known entities who can more easily move through neighborhood social spaces. According to my fieldwork and interviews, men desire such mobility and even express some envy at what they perceive as women's greater social agency when casually interacting with strangers. Without the visibility afforded by locally organized group activities, many Japanese men are cautious when interacting with unknown women and children, concerned that they risk being labeled as flirts or predators. Japanese society affords child-toting fathers some protection from negative labels, but these men remain self-aware of their potentially threatening status when interacting with strangers. This consciousness suggests that—despite the men's attempts to align their masculinities with traits traditionally considered feminine—fathers continue to grapple with gender constructs still tied to promiscuity and the potential for violence. Thus Japanese nonprofits and local groups centered on fathering may provide twenty-first-century fathers some of these men's most reassuring and relaxing spaces, where children do not have to be present physically to serve as the bridge between men in the same life stage.

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