



LESSON PLANS ON AGING ISSUES:
Creative Ways to Meet Social Studies Standards

Participation in Government

**A COMPARISON OF JAPAN AND
THE UNITED STATES ON ISSUES OF AGING**

Ithaca College Gerontology Institute
www.ithaca.edu/aging/schools

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A Comparison of Japan and The United States on Issues of Aging

Introduction

This activity compares legislation passed in the 1960's in both Japan and the United States. Students will consider examples of government attempts to improve the health of its older citizens. Underlying these laws are culturally different values and attitudes about older adults.

Objectives

Students will:

- Recognize that government has a role in promoting the general health and welfare of its citizens
- Compare attitudes about older adults in Japan and the United States
- Know the intent of the Older Americans Act
- Evaluate legislative attempts to improve the quality of life for older citizens

Key Terms

attitudes, cultural norms, health care, Older Americans Act

Materials

Handout: Japanese Attitudes Toward Older Adults

Handout: Laws Promoting Healthy Aging: A Comparison of Japan and the United States

Lesson Steps

1. Ask students what they already know about Japanese culture and attitudes. Briefly discuss possible differences in attitudes in Japan and the United States, such as the emphasis on the group rather than the individual, and on age rather than youth.
2. Distribute handout on Japanese attitudes toward older adults and discuss.
3. Distribute handout on Laws Promoting Healthy Aging. Read aloud the introduction to Japan's National Law for the Welfare of Elders (1963) and the United States Older Americans Act of 1965.
4. Discuss the differences in the choices of words in the introductions to the Japanese and American laws. Students probably will note the terminology in the Japanese law: "love," "respect," "wholesome" and "peaceful". In contrast, the United States law refers to the "inherent dignity of the individual." The United States law suggests that the older people are entitled to "equal opportunity" as citizens, not additional opportunity because of age.

Adapted from *Schools in an Aging Society: Social Studies Classroom Activities for Secondary Schools*, State of Connecticut, Department of Education and Department on Aging, 1992.

Extension Activities

- Ask students to rate, on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), the extent to which they believe the United States is meeting each of the ten objectives of the Older Americans Act. Discuss ratings with the class.

- Have students research topics that relate to any of the objectives of the Older Americans Act of 1965. Examples of contemporary political issues related to health include the following:
 - quality health care regardless of economic status
 - affordable and safe housing without fear of crime
 - quality institutional (nursing home) care
 - meaningful social, recreational and educational community activities
 - ethical issues related to living wills and euthanasia
 - elder abuse

- Invite local people who are natives of Japan to discuss how younger and older persons are treated in Japan.

Handout

Japanese Attitudes Toward Older Adults

- Japanese law requires the Japanese National Railways to reserve seats for the aged and the handicapped. The seats are a silver-gray color and are called the “Silver Seats.”
- Older adults in Japan usually do not try to hide their age. In Japan, it is proper etiquette to ask older persons their ages and to extend congratulations to them for their old age.
- Most Japanese over 70 receive all of their medical care free, including physician-prescribed medicines. All older Japanese receive free yearly medical examinations.
- Traditionally, the first son’s wife (the daughter-in-law) assumes most of the responsibility for taking care of older parents.
- In 1963, the Japanese made “Respect for Elders Day” a national holiday. Octogenarians (80 year olds) and centenarians (100 year olds) are awarded medals for reaching old age.

Although differences between Japan and the United States are noticeable, problems are similar.

- As in the United States, the ability to provide family care for older parents in Japan is changing as the older population increases and more Japanese women are employed.
- The current youth generation in Japan does not have the same reverential treatment of older people as their parents or grandparents did when they were young.
- Attitudes toward older people in Japan are changing. Respectful behavior (such as giving one’s seat to an older person) once was maintained by the traditional culture. The fact that Japanese laws are being passed to promote fundamental values, which once were maintained by cultural norms, suggests change in attitudes. As the Japanese become more westernized, so are attitudes about aging.

Handout

Laws Promoting Healthy Aging: A Comparison of Japan and the United States

Below are the prefaces to laws passed in Japan and the United States. What are the laws trying to promote? In what ways are the laws different? In what ways are cultural attitudes and values revealed in the wording of the laws?

National Law for the Welfare of the Elders: Japan, 1963

The elders shall be loved and respected as those who have for many years contributed toward the development of society, and a wholesome and peaceful life shall be guaranteed to them. In accordance with their desire and ability, the elders shall be given opportunities to engage in suitable work or to participate in social activities.

Older Americans Act of 1965: Declaration of Objectives for Older Americans

The Congress hereby finds and declares that, in keeping with the traditional American concepts of the inherent dignity of the individual in our democratic society, the older people of our Nation are entitled to . . . equal opportunity to the full and free enjoyment of the following objectives:

1. An adequate income in retirement, in accordance with the American standard of living.
2. The best possible physical and mental health which science can make available without regard to economic status.
3. Obtaining and maintaining suitable housing, independently selected, designed and located, with reference to special needs and available at costs which older citizens can afford.
4. Full restorative services for those who require institutional care, and a comprehensive array of community-based, long-term care services adequate to appropriately sustain older people in their communities and in their homes.
5. Opportunity for employment, with no discriminatory personnel practices because of age.
6. Retirement in health, honor and dignity - after years of contribution to the economy.
7. Participating in and contributing to meaningful activity within the widest range of civic, cultural, educational, training and recreational opportunities.
8. Efficient community services, including access to low-cost transportation, which provide a choice of supported living arrangements and social assistance in a coordinated manner and which are readily available when needed, with emphasis on maintaining a continuum of care for the vulnerable elderly.
9. Immediate benefit from proven research knowledge, which can sustain and improve health and happiness.
10. Freedom, independence and the free exercise of individual initiative in planning and managing their own lives; full participation in the planning and operation of community-based services and programs provided for their benefit; and protection against abuse, neglect and exploitation.