

# THE DAILY YOMIURI

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## PRIMARY ADVICE

# Turning hospitals into classrooms

By Helene J. Uchida

Special to The Daily Yomiuri

**Q.** I used to enjoy doing volunteer work in the pediatric ward of a hospital in Australia. I read stories to the children and played games with them. I would like to teach English at some local hospitals in my area. Is this kind of thing done in Japan?

S.T.

University exchange student  
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**A.** Children in hospitals live in a world that is quiet and closed; they are very receptive to interactive visits from volunteers who can bring in a little sunshine and happiness, whether they be musicians, storytellers, clowns, origami specialists, or English teachers.

I was so happy to receive your question as I believe there are others out there, like you, who could present interactive English activities on a volunteer basis in pediatric wards. I have been teaching English to children who have different forms of cancer at the National Kyushu Cancer Center in Fukuoka for 2½ years, and can honestly say it is the most enjoyable work I do. Why? Here is my story:

I became interested in these children after hearing stories from a pediatric oncologist who was a member of an English class I was teaching. I asked him if I could teach the children English over the summer when my university classes were off. He enthusiastically agreed and gave me some forms to fill out.

I decided to go for one hour a week. With games, posters, flash cards, CDs and picture books in my "hospital visit kit," I went and had my first lesson. The kids were very responsive. And interestingly enough, even though it was my goal to bring them happiness, they were the ones who made me happy!

Over time, the children taught me two things: one,

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Illustration by Atsuko Sugino

that sick children are as curious and as eager to learn as healthy ones; in addition, sick children tend to be very cooperative and supportive of each other. For example, in the children's ward, I could play ABC Bingo with preschoolers, moms, primary school students and high school students all together. The older players encouraged the younger ones and were very patient with them. Sometimes a high school student handed the winning card to a preschooler. They were like one big family.

When the summer ended and my university classes resumed, I could not bring myself to stop. So I squeezed the hospital visits into my schedule. One 3-year-old child with leukemia was one of the main reasons I continued. Her name was Nao-chan. She became my mentor in the pediatric ward, teaching me how to interact with sick children. Her mom told me that the ABCs fascinated her more than hiragana. I also learned from her that the children's conditions varied from week to week, so activities had to be adjusted accordingly. Nao, who had good weeks and bad, gave me signals of what she needed from me. One week she was too weak to participate, so I just sang English songs to her as her mother held her.

The hospital does not pay for transportation. But the amazing thing is that when people heard about what I

was doing, they wanted to help. Different companies have donated games, books, bags and T-shirts. When one close friend of mine heard what Japanese and American companies were doing, he made a generous financial contribution. So now I can ask other teachers to go in my place when I am out of town and at least pay for their transportation. At present I have a delightful British colleague, Graeme, who alternates with me each week.

On Children's Day I go with presents and games, and in December, the children receive a visit from Santa Claus while my staff distributes presents donated by sponsors. Sometimes I find a musician who accompanies us and performs for the children.

It is amazing how all of this generated from my listening to a doctor talk about his work during an English class. There is no telling what you can do if you give it a try.

I would suggest getting an introduction to someone at your local hospital. Then, follow up with a meeting. At that meeting, I would suggest you bring in your "hospital visit kit," which should be filled with flash cards, posters, picture books, CDs and games. If the hospital staff consider you, they may have some papers for you to fill out that basically ask about your personal background.

I promised the doctors there that I would never go if I had a cold or any kind of infection because the children are so susceptible.

The children and their mothers are an inspiration to me. I am no expert on how to orchestrate this kind of activity because each hospital is different, but I can assure you, it all comes from the heart. There are children out there waiting for you.

Readers are encouraged to send questions on any themes related to teaching English to younger learners—particularly those at the primary school level—to Helene J. Uchida via e-mail at [dy-edu@yomiuri.com](mailto:dy-edu@yomiuri.com) or fax (03) 3217-8369. Questions preferably should be written in English and should be accompanied by your name, occupation and the area you live in. This column will return on July 28.