

Japanese Celebrations

During every month of the year in Japan, there are festivals and special days to celebrate. Some Japanese celebrations are hundreds of years old, and many of them are just for children.

Shichi-Go-San

The English translation of shichi-go-san is seven-five-three. The Japanese festival Shichi-Go-San, celebrated on November 15, honors seven-, five-, and three-year- old children. On this special day, families visit a religious shrine to pray for the good health and happiness of the children. The day's celebration also includes parties and presents for the children. The children are given bags of holiday candy and are told that eating the candy will bring them good luck and a long life.

Children's Day

Although originally called Boys' Day, this national holiday now honors all Japanese children. Many Children's Day traditions, however, are still just for the boys in the family. On May 5, at the beginning of the day, families often take a special bath to wash away bad luck, and placing iris leaves in the water is thought to bring strength and bravery. Families also set up displays that include figures of warriors, toy weapons, banners, and armor for everyone to admire. Some of the weapons and armor in the displays are very old. Fathers often pass down their displays to their sons.

Brightly colored carp kites can be seen flying from poles in front of the houses of families that have sons. The large kite at the top symbolizes the father. The next kite represents the mother, and the last kite is for the son. More kites are added if the family has more sons. The carp is a strong, courageous fish that swims upstream against a river's currents. Japanese parents hope that their sons will grow to be strong and courageous like the carp.

Hina Matsuri

Hina Matsuri is a doll festival. Also called Girls' Day, it is celebrated every year on March 3. On this day, girls display a special set of dolls called hina (hee-na). Mothers and grandmothers often give their own sets of dolls to their young daughters or granddaughters, so many doll collections are old and valuable. Older dolls have painted porcelain faces and glass eyes. Most of the newer dolls are made of plastic.



The dolls include figures of the emperor and empress, ladies-in-waiting, the minister of state, courtiers, and court musicians, all dressed in traditional clothing. They are displayed on a tiered stand that is usually covered with a red cloth and are often placed amidst special furniture and replicas of food. After the holiday, the dolls are carefully stored away for the following year.

The Gion Festival

In 869, the Japanese city of Kyoto experienced a terrible epidemic during which many people became ill and many died. The emperor prayed to the gods for his people's health and sent an offering of weapons to the Gion Shrine. When his prayers were answered and people were no longer suffering from the disease, the thankful emperor organized a big parade to celebrate the first Gion Festival.

Today, huge decorated boxes, called hoko, are paraded through the streets. Some of the boxes weigh many tons, and they can be as tall as a four-story building. Some are hundreds of years old. The boxes are set on huge wheels that are about 8 feet (2.5 meters) in diameter. After the parade, they are taken apart and carefully stored for the next festival.

Each year before the Gion Festival, a boy is selected for a special role. Dressed up like a priest, with his face painted white, the boy inspects the boxes while they are being put together. Someone walks with the boy and holds an umbrella over his head to shade him from the sun. Then, right before the parade, the boy takes a place of honor on top of a hoko. As the hoko is pulled along the parade route, the boy has a bird's-eye view of the celebration.

New Year's Day

Greeting cards and family visits are New Year's traditions in Japan. The New Year celebration is on January 1. For Japanese children, the New Year celebration includes playing traditional games. Girls often play a game similar to badminton. Boys fly kites and spin tops. Both girls and boys buy strips of paper that have fortunes written on them. They tie the strips like

blossoms onto the branches of bare winter trees. The children hope that this tradition will bring them good luck in the new year.

Tanabata

The Japanese Star Festival known as Tanabata is celebrated on the seventh day of the seventh month. It is the custom on this day for people, especially children, to write their wishes on small pieces of paper and hang them on bamboo branches. Some wishes are written in the form of poems. The bamboo branches may also be adorned with brightly colored paper decorations. Colorful paper streamers decorating the doorways of shops, schools, and homes are another common sight during the Tanabata festival.



The Sapporo Snow Festival

The whole family enjoys the weeklong Snow Festival in the city of Sapporo, which is in the northernmost part of Japan. Held each year in February, this festival is one of Japan's biggest winter events. Millions of people come to enjoy the winter activities and regional foods, but the highlights of the festival are the snow and ice sculptures. Teams of artists come to compete in an international snow sculpture contest. Hundreds of sculptures of famous people, buildings, and events are constructed each year. Some of the sculptures are more than 60 feet (18 m) tall!

Questions About *Japanese Celebrations*

1. Why do you think that Boys' Day is no longer just for boys?
2. Why did the emperor organize a parade to celebrate the first Gion Festival?
3. Write the letter of the correct Japanese celebration on the line for each activity.

a. New Year's Day

b. Gion Festival

c. Children's Day

d. Shichi-Go-San

e. Hina Matsuri

f. Tanabata

_____ Carp kites fly from poles in front of houses.

_____ Huge decorated boxes are paraded through the streets.

_____ Young girls display special doll collections.

_____ Children play traditional games.

_____ A special bath washes away bad luck.

_____ A boy dressed up like a priest has a place of honor in the parade.

_____ Children write out their wishes and hang them on bamboo branches.

_____ Children go to parties and receive presents and bags of holiday candy.

4. Which Japanese festival would you like to attend? Explain why.

Vocabulary

1. Write the letter of each word next to the correct definition.

- _____ having several levels or rows, one above the other
- _____ a type of fish
- _____ figures carved out of rock or another hard material
- _____ referring to the fine clay used to make china objects
- _____ royal attendants
- _____ decorated with ornaments
- _____ a religious minister
- _____ a place or an area that honors a holy person or an event
- _____ a game using rackets to hit a shuttlecock over a net
- _____ the flow of water in a stream or river
- _____ the spread of a disease affecting a lot of people
- _____ the measurement of a circle from one side to the other

a. badminton

g. epidemic

b. diameter

h. adorned

c. shrine

i. courtiers

d. carp

j. sculptures

e. current

k. priest

f. porcelain

l. tiered

2. Use your own words to explain the meaning of the phrase bird's-eye view.

3. The words *display* and *parade* are both used in the story as a noun and as a verb. Write your own sentence for each of these words. Then write noun or verb to show how you used the word in the sentence.

display: noun or verb

parade: noun or verb

Root Words and Suffixes

1. Write the root word and the suffix for each word listed below. Remember that some words may have a spelling change.

Root Word

Suffix

a. celebration

b. happiness

c. symbolize

d. brightly

e. courageous

f. Japanese

g. valuable

h. musician

i. thankful

2. Write each suffix listed next to its meaning.

- a. having or full of
- b. deserving or worthy of
- c. condition or quality of
- d. of a place
- e. make into
- f. in a certain way
- g. person
- h. the state or act of
- i. having the quality of

Bonus: Use the meanings of the suffixes above to write a definition for the word *carefully*.

Using Adjectives

1. Write all of the adjectives in each of the following sentences.
 - a. They are displayed on a tiered stand covered with a red cloth and are often placed amidst special furniture and replicas of food.
 - b. Greeting cards and family visits are New Year's traditions in Japan, and, for Japanese children, traditional games are part of the celebration.
 - c. Some wishes are written in the form of poems, and the bamboo branches may also be adorned with colorful paper decorations.

2. Find the adjectives or adjective phrases in the story that describe the items below and write them on the lines.

- a. _____ , _____ fish
- b. _____ carp kites
- c. _____ faces
- d. _____ boxes
- e. _____ trees
- f. _____ and _____ sculptures

3. Write adjectives of your own to describe each item below.

- a. _____ tower
- b. _____ meadow
- c. _____ bicycle
- d. _____ sweater
- e. _____ vase