

The Japanese word *oyako* is a combination of the characters for parent (親) and child (子). It is unique in that it combines the parent and child into one unit, stressing the group rather than the individual, and reflecting the vertical link between generations.

The parent is the link to the past; the child, a bridge to the future.



When Bruce Osborn first photographed punk musicians and their parents in 1982, he had no way of knowing that it would turn out to be a life-long project of over 7,000 photo shoots over three-and-a-half decades, covering Japanese society in all its variety from musicians, sushi chefs and monks, to sports figures, adult film actresses, celebrities and the family next door.

Oyako is a unique exploration of this special relationship—in a selection of photos and text.

In a fresh and eye-opening way, it explores the very meaning of family and familial relationships and challenges us to consider our feelings about family.



To the women in my life: Yoshiko, daughters Mika and Yura,
and granddaughter Luna

Oyako: An Ode to Parents and Children by Bruce Osborn
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親 *Yasuko Tarumi / housewife*
子 *Gen Tarumi / entrepreneur*

The history of Oyako

Oyako is the Japanese word for “parent and child.” It is unique in that this vertical relationship is seen as one unit and is described by a single word. It is clearly different than the word *kazoku*, which is the word for the family.

My fascination with oyako and what was to be the start of my “Oyako Project” began with a magazine assignment I was given in 1982 to photograph Japanese punk musicians. It was at the time when my wife was expecting our first child, so while I was considering how to take the photos of the rockers, I was also contemplating becoming a father. These

thoughts converged when I hit on the idea of taking photos of the punk musicians with one of their parents. There is a Japanese saying – *Oya no kao ga mitemitai*, or “I’d sure like to see his parents” – that is often uttered when coming in contact with bad-mannered children, and that helped solidify the idea for my photo shoot. I thought it would be an amusing way to bring out the differences in lifestyles and fashions between the two generations.

But, surprisingly, what came through were the similarities. I realized that when I looked beyond that outer shell of clothing and hairstyles, they shared many things in common. It might be a nose, or a way of laughing, or how they walked. The child had a unique connection with each of his parents that could never be broken



親 Yae Nakano / housewife
子 Shigeru Nakano / musician / 1982

I was hooked. In fact, the pictures revealed so much about the generational relations that it made me want to continue exploring the theme as a way of looking at society and the tremendous changes we go through in our lifetimes. I decided to take more oyako photos, and more deeply explore the significance of what I had glimpsed in that first shoot.

In order to focus on the oyako relationship without any other distractions, and to give it more continuity, I chose to shoot in black-and-white film against a plain background. I sought parents and children from a wide range of traditional, everyday and unusual occupations. Soon, what had started as a minor interest became a passion. With the support of my wife, Yoshiko, the series continued.

As I got further into this project and my own family grew, I remained fascinated by the special relationship that exists in every oyako, along with the more common bonds that are shared by all parents and children. When taking an oyako photograph, I feel I am looking at more than just a moment in time; as they stand together, I can see their past, present and future. There is another Japanese proverb, *ko wa kasugai*, that means “children bind couples together.” But I believe it’s more than just the parents that are affected. Children tie the family to society, generation to generation, and add another link to the bonds that exist between all living things. Such thoughts helped me realize just how deep an impression these families have made on me.



Moving to Japan opened my eyes to another way of thinking. By nature, Japanese are shy when it comes to showing outward affection, and express their feelings in other ways. It is common practice for young children to sleep with their parents and to take baths together. Considering the harmony of the group over one's personal desires is the philosophy of the culture. Parents are the first people that a newborn child meets, and the deep bond that is cultivated is important as the basis for all future relations. Like nurturing a small plant, as the child grows, so do the roots that connect them to their family, relations and community.

If you take to heart the fact that life itself is passed from parents to children, creating a long chain

that has brought us to this very day, you realize that the oyako concept transcends both borders and beliefs. After meeting so many parents and children and pondering their unique ties, I see these relationships as permeating not just the family but moving throughout society, regions and even nature. We are as much bonded to Mother Earth and its environment as we are to each other: it's a vision of the world that instills reverence for life and inspires world peace.

Though we had no idea how significant this series would become, like raising a child, it has grown into a lifelong project for us. Over the last 36 years, I have shot over 7,000 photos of oyako, and now a selection of them are making an appearance in this book. ∞



**Parents
always want
their children
to be normal
like everybody
else,**

but
whenever
I get set
on those
tracks, I
get just so
far before
I feel like
getting off.

—Shigeru Nakano



Oyako are the hope of the planet!

— Sizzle Ohtaka





親 Danjuro Ichikawa / kabuki actor
子 Shinnosuke Ichikawa / kabuki actor



親 Itsuko Sagara / housewife
子 Lucy / musician



親 *Taijun Kagenaka / Buddhist monk*
子 *Akira Kagenaka / Buddhist monk*

“The chant, ‘appearance is an illusion and emptiness* is form,’ expresses the Buddhist belief that letting go of fixed ideas leads to deeper understanding. Though life is fleeting, I am filled with happiness at seeing energy flow from me to my children and to their children. This is the way of nature and the continuation of life.”

Taijun Kagenaka



*Emptiness, void, sky, heavens (空 – *ku and sora*)



The better a family gets along,
the closer they become to their friends.
First between parents and children.

That's the foundation.

**It then continues
on to friends,
friends of friends,
friends of friends
of friends . . .**
and all the way round the world.

– Tetsuya Chiba



I used to think all adults had
patterns on their bodies.
So what a shock it was the first time
I went to a public bath:
nobody had any tattoos!

—Keiko Ohwada

親 Hiroshi Matsui / restaurant owner
子 Hikaru Matsui / junior high school student





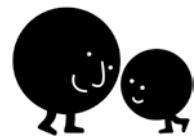
親 Seiji Nakata / carpenter
子 Akiko Nakata / carpenter



親 Miyazo Tsukahara / fish wholesaler
子 Yoshio Tsukahara / fish wholesaler

親子の日 /
Oyako Day

In 2003, my wife Yoshiko and I decided to take things one step further. We created a special day to think about the parent-child bond, in hopes that it would provide an opportunity for all of us to re-examine and reaffirm this bedrock relation that is tied to our lives. Since the second Sunday of May is Mother's Day and the third Sunday of June is Father's Day, we felt the fourth Sunday of July would be a fitting day to celebrate Oyako Day. The first Oyako Day was celebrated on July 27, 2003, when we invited 100 families to have their photos taken. Yoshiko and I were so thrilled by the response that we have continued to do this event every year since. Even if you don't have children of your own, we all have parents that gave us the gift of life. Oyako Day is about the celebration of that life. ∞



2nd Sunday of May is Mother's Day
3rd Sunday of June is Father's Day
**4th Sunday of
July is Oyako Day**

About the
photographer



Bruce Osborn was born in Southern California and raised in its surf and skateboard culture. He began his career in Los Angeles as the photo editor and chief photographer at *Photographic Record Magazine* before moving to Tokyo in 1980. Bruce’s clientele has included *Brutus*, *Interview*, and *National Geographic* (Japan). He has shot ad campaigns for Sony, Parco, and Visa, and photographed Etta James, Ron Wood, Bill Gates, Kenzaburo Oe, and Richard Branson, among others. He has held photo exhibitions at Kanazawa’s 21 Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Boston Children’s Museum and the Shizuoka City Museum. His life-long project is the Oyako (parents and children) photo series. In 2003, Bruce and his wife Yoshiko created the Oyako Day social action. They were recently awarded the Higashi-Kuninomiya International Culture Award for their contributions to Japanese society. A documentary film about their project, *Oyako ~ Present To The Future*, was released in 2014. ∞

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