

# Empowering Children with Special Needs

A Japanese pediatrician has founded a center of care and learning, to bring smiles to children with special needs in Kenya



Every morning, about 15 children and their families arrive with smiling faces at a house in a suburb of Nairobi. The place is The Garden of Siloam, a center established in 2015 to provide education and health care for children with disabilities, and there to greet them is its founder,

pediatrician Kazuko Kumon. Here, children with mental and physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy and autism receive classes and rehabilitation in a fun-filled environment.

Kumon first noticed that children with disabilities in Kenya were not receiving trained care and education when she was visiting the country in 2002 as a member of a Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) project involved in an initiative to reduce HIV infection. This absence of support suggests a need for greater societal awareness about people with disabilities in general, and it leaves many families struggling. “The spirit of helping shouldn’t be based on pity for the weak or disadvantaged,” explains Kumon. Believing that everyone is born with the power for living, and that children with disabilities just need a helping hand in bringing

such power out, she therefore wants to lend that hand in the Christian spirit as a loving neighbor.

Through funding from Japan, Kumon was able to establish the Garden. But when she began searching for staff, she suddenly hit a wall—there are very few people in Kenya who have received specialist training in caring for and educating children with disabilities. Kumon thereupon started training her own personnel from scratch.

“In Kenya, people believe pain is gain when it comes to rehabilitation. This widely held belief was also the norm in Japan in the past. But if crying and screaming and exposure to pain and fear is involved, that’s entirely the wrong way to unleash the innate power of these children,” says Kumon.

Hiring therapists, teachers, social workers and the like to make up the Garden’s staff, Kumon requested that

they did not rely simply on classic therapy options, such as “cerebral palsy massage,” but instead “observe and choose the care required by the children and their families.” The staff, unfamiliar with such training, were initially at a loss. But looking back after two years of working at the Garden since it was founded, staff member Basilisa says, “I have finally realized that the way we do things here is far more effective.”

Kumon reflects, “By receiving appropriate treatment and education early, many of the children are now able to utilize the potential they were born with. I think the one thing that I can do as someone who has come from Japan is to use tangible empirical images to convey to Kenyans what the children are actually capable of and what kind of society it is possible to create.”

In Japan, families of children with disabilities came together in

solidarity to secure greater rights to receive welfare and education. “As there are still now many families who are expending all their energy simply looking after their children with disabilities, I think the first important step is to create places like The Garden of Siloam so that there can be a place where time can be shared together without stress. I also hope that the support we offer here

can help to empower the families, so that they, too, can join together and advocate for more social benefits.”

Today, as she carries on her everyday efforts to encourage Kenya’s welfare for children with special needs to take root, Kumon welcomes the children and their families to the Garden with a smile as broad and happy as the children’s. ✨



## Kazuko Kumon

Graduated from Hokkaido University School of Medicine. After working for six years as a pediatrician, she started medical humanitarian assistance in 2001 in Sierra Leone and Cambodia, and Kenya in 2002. In 2015, she established The Garden of Siloam (“Siloam” is the name of the pool where Jesus healed a man who was blind) in a suburb of Nairobi.

Above: A mother and a child enjoy horse riding while on an excursion organized by the Garden. Below: The children smile with delight in a watermelon eating contest.



Seeing the natural smiles return to the faces of the children and their families gives Kumon her strength of purpose.



Recognizing the struggles many families face in raising children with disabilities, The Garden of Siloam cares for the families as well.