

## Tsukuba Kid Doctor

Tsukuba Kid Doctor is a summer holiday event which is organized by the Tsukuba City targeting elementary and junior high school students around the country. Participating children carry a special passport and go around various exhibits and events organized by research and other organizations, where they can learn cutting edge technologies and natural sciences. At each place, children receive a stamp on their passport, encouraging them to visit as many places as possible. This year a total of 39 facilities are participating in this event. Children can visit experimental research centers which are usually off limits to the public as well as company research centers. Some offer events where kids can gain hands-on experiences such as extraction of DNA, wearing robot suits and conducting concrete destruction experimentation, experiences which are new and surprising to adults, too.

JICA Tsukuba also participates in this event every year, and during the summer holiday, permanent exhibits in public areas are consolidated and the number of “ethnic cuisines” from different countries increases in canteens. During the event, JICA Tsukuba also organizes four events where ‘Tsukuba Kid Doctor’ participants can interact with JICA training participants and enhance their familiarity with international understanding and agriculture.

AAI is also running one of the events through our training course on vegetable cultivation technology and marketing method for small scale farmers. This year’s theme is “Let’s become a watermelon doctor!” We offered a lecture on watermelons and measuring of sugar content of watermelons. Children can also eat the watermelons! Although our participants who were at the event did not necessarily speak Japanese, we could observe children enjoying interacting with them, cutting watermelon and looking into Brix meter (sugar content gauges) to compare the sweetness of different watermelons. We hope that we offered an event which left good memories for the children who came to Tsukuba during their summer holiday.

By the way, every year, we are struggling to come up with ideas for a good hands-on event. It is actually one of the more difficult duties of ours!

The reasons for the difficulties are as follows. Firstly, the target age group (elementary and junior high school students) is very wide ranging from 6 to 15 years old. The majority of child participants are elementary school students. It is a

challenge to draw interest from every child participant given the age differences. In addition, although children’s concentration levels are high, they do not last long. Therefore we need to communicate key elements in a short time. At the same time, we cannot use technical terms which we often use and we should not talk fast. Given these factors, we decided to run the session using quizzes. We organized the session so that we gradually shifted from easy questions to more difficult questions in order to cater for the wide age group. We also tried to draw their attention to the speaker away from slides from time to time. I think it went pretty well. But there are quite a few children who are rather knowledgeable and they sometimes provided the right answer as soon as questions were asked. Apparently, these facts are often used as trivia in Atlas and school correspondence notebooks.

After generally studying about watermelons, we conducted hands on measurement of sugar contents using Brix meters. Sugar content gauges are actually well known among children thanks to a TV program featuring idol singers working on farms. However, nobody has really used one before and they tended to enjoy it a lot. We asked children to check sugar contents of different parts of a watermelon – the middle part, around seeds and the outside part. This showed the difference with numbers and they then ate the experimentation material to confirm the results with their taste buds. Often older children tend to dominate a group. Therefore we specifically asked our JICA training participants who were facilitating each group’s work to ensure that everybody had a chance to speak and contribute. Of course we also conducted a rehearsal with the participants. We also paid attention to the disinfecting of knives and cutting boards and make sure that towels were clean in order to ensure hygiene.

Although it is quite difficult work, children’s smiles are a special reward which we can only obtain from this event. I am happy when we receive positive comments in the post-session questionnaires, such as “lecture was easy to understand,” and “I was happy to be able to talk to the participants (from other countries).” Still the most common comment was that “the watermelon was delicious!” The watermelons we used were harvested in our experimental plots as part of the vegetable cultivation course. Therefore what better reward could there be for the producers, than people enjoying eating our watermelons!

(By Sawada, August 2014)

