

# Doll Festival & Children's Day



**Hina-matsuri, the Doll Festival**, on 3 March and **Kodomo-no-Hi, Children's Day**, on 5 May would be two of the better known Japanese festivals overseas. Many Australian primary schools introduce them to students when they are studying about Japan. Both festivals are still widely observed in Japan, the focus on both occasions is children, and, very important for a successful festival, there are some great decorations.

**Hina-matsuri** is a festival to wish for the wellbeing and prosperity of girls in a family. Today the festival is synonymous with the multi-tiered display of court dolls with the emperor and empress at the top and exquisitely reproduced accessories throughout. This type of display became common during the Edo Period when doll manufacture flourished. Originally the dolls displayed for *hina-matsuri* were just a pair of dolls. The *kamibina* [top left] are an example of the early paper dolls that were used. Some areas still use these in a custom of releasing the dolls in a reed raft down a river.

For reasons of space and cost, many families just display a pair of dolls, a hanging depicting the dolls or make a special display with beautiful single dolls.

The peach blossom still features prominently in *hina* displays. The festival has a lesser known name of *Momo no Sekku*, the Peach Festival. The peach blossom is said to symbolise happiness in marriage and a mild manner, traditionally considered desirable in women in Japan.



**Kodomo-no-Hi** is a public holiday in Japan and you will see colourful carp streamers or windsocks called *koi-nobori* flying above rivers, playing fields and larger houses.

Smaller options are available for apartment dwellers—necessary because *koi-nobori* can measure up to 3 metres! Against the blue sky, the *koi-nobori* appear to be swimming. The carp is said to symbolise strength and success which has its basis in a Chinese legend in which a carp swam up a waterfall to become a dragon.

Although *Kodomo-no-hi* is now known as children's day, it is still largely celebrated in the traditional way as a day for boys—the partner for *Hina-matsuri*.

Some families choose to display warrior dolls known as *musha-ningyo* or scaled-down versions of samurai armour and helmets. Often an iris flower is part of the display. It used to be common for children to have a bath with iris leaves in the water, as this was thought to protect them from ill-health and evil.

Kintaro dolls might be displayed at this time. This pint-sized warrior was said to possess Herculean strength. The doll here carries an axe that produces thunder. Look closely at the larger *koi-nobori* and you will often see Kintaro hanging on for dear life to a carp as it makes its way up the waterfall.

**Who is Kintaro?** Today Kintaro is considered a folk tale and is a well known story about a boy of great strength who grew up to be a powerful samurai warrior. He is usually depicted as a boy wearing a red *haragake* with the character for gold on it, the first character of his name. *Haragake* used to be worn by young children. Kintaro seems to have actually been the childhood name of a real 10th-11th century warrior, but later stories about him said he was born of a mountain witch.

You can find a version of the Kintaro legend on the Web Japan website:  
<http://web-japan.org/kidsweb/folk/kintaro/kintaro01.html>

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