Do you know anyone turning three, five, or seven this year? In Japan, those are special ages, and there is a day to celebrate kids reaching this milestone in their lives. This is called the 7-5-3, or shichi-go-san, festival for boys and girls who turn three, boys who turn five, and girls who turn seven. The festival is normally held before or after November 15, a date that is considered to be fortuitous.

Since in times past it was difficult to bring young children up safely, they were considered to be somewhat otherworldly, halfway between gods and humans. At the age of three, a child was no longer considered a baby, and he or she graduated from infancy to childhood. After
seven, it was thought that a child was first accepted as a member of society. People prayed to the gods and the ancestors to thank them for watching over the children and helping them to grow safely. Even after this, they also asked for continued good health and to keep bad luck away.

Nowadays, in the weeks leading up to 7-5-3, kids dress up in fancy costumes and take photographs to mark the occasion. Some people get professional pictures taken at photography studios. For many, this is their first time to wear formal clothing. Five-year-old boys often wear hakama, a kind of kimono, and girls age seven wear obi, a wide cloth belt, for the first time, instead of a knotted cord to fasten their kimono. Sometimes, the clothing is rented, sometimes bought, and sometimes passed down from older family members. Everyone looks fantastic!

The dressed up children and their families visit a shrine to receive a special blessing. A priest prays for their good health, and the child may also receive some good luck charms like omamori, ema and chitoseame. Everyone is thankful for a healthy, happy child.

Omamori means “protection charm” and is usually a small piece of wood painted with the name of the shrine, blessed by a priest, and placed in a tiny embroidered cloth bag. Ema is a wooden plaque where you can write wishes and leave them at the shrine for the gods to consider. Chitoseame, or thousand-year candy, is a treat made especially for 7-5-3 kids. This long stick candy is colored lucky red and white and comes in a bright colorful package decorated with symbols of luck and long life such as bamboo, pine trees, turtles and cranes.

What a nice goody bag! So if you are in Japan in November and see kids dressed up in splendid costumes — with beautiful hair ornaments and old-fashioned zori (thonged sandals), carrying colorful envelopes decorated with cranes and turtles — you will know that they have turned 3, 5, or 7 this year and are celebrating their good fortune at having grown up safely.