

Play, Participation and Safe Places

Three development keywords necessary for any community

UNICEF Symposium:

Working with Children to Build Resilient Societies

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What We Learned from “Build Back Better”

Ken Hayami, JCU East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Programme Director



At the bedrock of our efforts—which started in March 2011—always lied the concept of “Build Back Better.” This is a concept that is used in UNICEF emergency assistance throughout the world. It means implementing assistance that leads to creating conditions that are better than before the disaster.

Following the disaster, we focused assistance on children, using UNICEF expertise developed through many years of experience in disaster and conflict areas all over the world. At shelters, for instance, in addition to distributing various material relief, we provided places to safely play for children who had lost all sense of normalcy to the disaster. We widely promoted Child-Friendly Spaces that offered psychosocial care to children using the one thing that children need most in their daily lives: playtime. The three keywords I took away from these experiences were: play, safe places and participation.

Playtime and participation are more than leisure activities. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was concluded over 25 years ago, emphasizes that a child’s rights to play and participate are equal to the rights of survival and development. It is all about allowing children to exercise all of their abilities—physical and mental—as freely as possible. Play and participation protect and cultivate a child’s spirit, and are essential elements in their everyday lives.

I believe that protecting a child’s spirit and nurturing a passion for life leads to increasing the resilience of children and the community as a whole. That is why the third key word—safe places—is so important, and why we must secure safe places for children. We must build towns and cities that are child-friendly. This is important not only for areas affected by disasters, but for the development of all communities.

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Keynote Speech



Edward Chaiban, Director of Programmes, UNICEF Headquarters

Disaster risk is at an all-time high. Every year, massive losses are caused by earthquakes, tsunamis, tropical cyclones and river flooding. We know it is the poorest and most marginalized who bear the brunt of disasters. Children are also among the most vulnerable.

We know that by the end of the 20th century, disasters related to climate change affected about 66 million children per year. This number is projected to triple in the coming decades—that's 200 million children. As you know well, here in Japan, while we cannot always prevent floods, storms, earthquakes and tsunamis from happening, we can reduce the risk.

To prepare for disasters, while it's important to have robust facilities and systems, at the heart of a resilient society is its people. Children are very aware of their changing environment, and are in fact sometimes more knowledgeable than adults, given what they learn at school and through other communication sources. So, as we work on behalf of children, we must also work with them—by listening to their ideas, and incorporating their insights into disaster planning.
(Paraphrased)

Playtime: A tool for tapping into resiliency

Ryoko Honda, Clinical Psychologist and Board Member of the Japan Association for Play Therapy

Traumatic experiences are mainly controlled by the right brain—the part of the brain responsible for feelings and emo-

tions—and not the left-brain—the part of the brain responsible for language and logic. The result is that memories of frightening experiences are recorded as vague images or feelings, without us

being able to linguistically process them. That is why we utilize therapy that includes sensory activities such as music and art. And that is why it is so vital to provide children the opportunity to play as a part of assistance activities in order to directly engage the right brain.

Playing is the purest form of expression for children. It allows them to comfortably express a frightening experience or concern. Play also helps children organize their emotions surrounding an experience, understand and express those emotions, and overcome them. Children both enjoy and gain a sense of security from companionship with friends and people they trust. Playtime allows them the opportunity to control things that were impossible to control before, helping them overcome the sense of powerlessness and recover trust.

Playing helps children tap into their inherent resilience.



Playtime: A tool for cultivating the energy for life

Hideaki Amano, Board Member, Japan Adventure Play-ground Association

"Adventure Play Areas" is an initiative aimed at making every effort to ensure children can play freely. We only had four sites in the Tohoku region before the disaster, but now over 30 organizations are implementing our initiative.

Playing exists in a world without a pre-established harmony. Take making a Japanese toy bamboo helicopter, for instance.



In March 2015, the Third UN Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction was held in Sendai, Miyagi. During the five-day conference, more than 700 events were put on by central and local government agencies, universities, research institutes, NGOs and civil society. This all took place on the side of the main conference, which was attended by representatives from 187 UN member states and UN agencies. JCU participated by hosting a symposium together with UNICEF associations in Fukushima, Miyagi and Iwate as well as experts from UNICEF Headquarters attending the conference. The symposium sought to share JCU's experiences providing assistance in the affected areas and expertise that can be used to prevent future disasters.

Watch a video of the symposium here (120 minutes).



<http://j.mp/5yrs-mv1>

I observed one child building one for the first time, and with no prior experience it's difficult to shape the shaft and wings. I watched and thought to myself, "Be careful or you will shave too much off the wings." And, as expected, the child shaved too much wood from the wings. She stared at the wings, processing what had happened. She knew something had gone wrong. But that's when she said, "Oh, well. I can still use it as a skewer for food!" This transition of ideas is tremendously important. An adult teaching a child how to make a bamboo helicopter would see only one possible final result: the bamboo helicopter. Adults guide children toward what they believe to be the correct answer. This is one of the reasons children lose energy for life and become less adaptable.

Children use playtime to continuously create new realities. It is playtime that helps strengthen their ability to respond to all types of situations.

Creating opportunity

Michiko Ono, Child Protection Advisor

Generous support poured in for children who lost both of their parents to the disaster. Meanwhile, however, it took time for assistance to reach children who had only lost one of their parents, and we noticed that children who lost a mother were particularly vulnerable. The majority of existing measures in place for single parents target single-mother households. When a father loses a spouse that father immediately becomes responsible for child-rearing and household duties in addition to their normal job. As you can imagine, a large number of fathers and their children in this situation face very trying circumstances.



In Japan, fathers rarely exchange child-rearing information or ask for assistance from one another. In light of this, we implemented training for professionals involved in child-rearing support, teaching them skills useful in providing assistance targeting fathers. We also implemented awareness-building activities targeting the public sector. We provided support to hold events

at resorts and restart community festivals that had stopped following the disaster. This made opportunities for fathers and their children to relax and interact with other families.

Participation: Learning from children

Shinya Sato, Professor, Yamagata University

Many children wanted to do something to help their communities following the disaster. And, in fact, many children supported activities at shelters in various ways. It was around this time that the



Association for Children's Environment held the International Competition for the Disaster Recovery Plan after the Great East Japan Earthquake. That was when JCU joined hands with Takenaka Corporation and Yamagata University to launch a collaborative project (pages 10-12).

Assistance efforts centering on play, participation and safe places started amidst tremendously tough circumstances in areas suffering damage from the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power station accident. People were forced to live in temporary housing for longer than expected and safe places for children to play—which is necessary for their development—were scarce.

Efforts were made to revise local hazard maps following the disaster. However, it would seem essential that we look at recovery plans using a phased approach: disaster preparedness and reconstruction plans for one, three, five and ten years after the disaster. I also believe that efforts be made to encourage children to participate in these efforts, just as with urban development learning opportunities. This will ensure that their ideas are incorporated into space planning and community development, which directly impact the growth of children.

Presentations by Children

Several students who participated in past JCU activities also took the stage at the symposium. This included Haruto Sasaki, who participated in the 2012 Future Classroom workshops held in Otsuchi, Iwate (page 12), as well as sixth graders from Itoyo Primary School in Soma, Fukushima, who participated in the Furusato Soma Children's Reconstruction Council (page 11). The students spoke about the situation in the affected areas following the disaster and their thoughts about reconstruction from their own perspectives as children, and presented about their own disaster preparedness efforts.



Haruto, who was a fifth-year primary school student at the time of the workshop, is now a third-year junior high school student. This year, Haruto will witness the completion of a new joint primary and junior high school facility that was constructed while incorporating feedback from the children.



Students from Itoyo Primary School closed their presentation with a powerful message: "Let's spread it to the world! Disasters are no match for the resilience of Japan!"