

Children want to participate in post-tsunami recovery and want space to play: Save the Children surveys 11,000 children after Japan disaster

TOKYO, March 1, 2012. Since the massive earthquake and tsunami hit the coast of Japan nearly 12 months ago, international aid agency Save the Children has surveyed over 11,000 children on the recovery process in post-tsunami Japan.

Close to one year on, over 300,000 people are living in temporary housing communities, often set up in schoolyards and parks, limiting children's space to play.

But although children have been among the hardest-hit by the disaster – losing parents, friends and teachers, and seeing their homes and schools destroyed – they have often not been consulted in the recovery process, or given a role in rebuilding their own lives.

Nearly 90% of children interviewed in Save the Children's "Hear Our Voice" survey said they wanted to play a role in the recovery process. As one girl in grade seven responded, "I want children's opinions and voices to be heard, not only have adults making the decisions."

Save the Children's research also asked children what they most wanted to see included in the government's recovery plans for their municipalities. Given the limited play areas available after the disaster, children said they wanted to have safe places to play and spend time with friends, which Save the Children experts say will allow them to return to a sense of normalcy following the extreme stress of last year's earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis. Ideas ranged from having swings in parks, having a baseball field – a popular sport in Japan, to making smaller steps on existing slides so younger children can play on them just as easily as the older kids.

Rioppe, 11, from the coastal town of Kamaishi, said "I'd love to have a playground, especially one that is safe". She explains "I want there to be no sharp things, or things that can get broken easily. I don't want concrete. With concrete, when we fall, it is easy to get injured."

As part of its five-year programme in Japan, Save the Children is highlighting children's participation in the recovery process. The charity has created child-led clubs in areas hardest-hit by the earthquake and tsunami, where many parks and other play areas for children were destroyed or used as grounds to host the new temporary houses.

With help from Save the Children, children in the clubs develop their own versions of the recovery plans they would like to see for their towns, and have been presenting these to municipal authorities. On February 25th, a group of child representatives from the clubs travelled to Tokyo to present their recovery plans to Japan's Minister for the newly created Reconstruction Agency.