

FUKUSHIMA FAMILIES

Children and families affected by Fukushima's nuclear crisis share their concerns one year on

Save the Children has carried out a new piece of field research, speaking to 61 children and parents from Fukushima and compiling the major concerns and issues still felt almost one year since the crisis at Daichi nuclear plants. The focus of this research has been to increase understanding of what the current situation is for children and their parents from Fukushima – including those who have relocated, and those who have stayed in their original homes – and what the primary concerns are for the children affected by this crisis.

Key Findings

Younger children in some places with lower radiation levels – such as Iwaki – understand that radiation could be bad for them, but had little understanding of what it was, recognising that it wasn't something you could touch, see, smell or taste – only that you could get sick if you were exposed to too much of it. They had been communicated this information from adults in their lives, such as parents, other family members or teachers; or from watching television.

At the same time, parents interviewed in Fukushima City where the radiation level is comparatively high reported that their younger children are very conscious of radiation effects. One mother told that her seven year-old boy no longer comments on the beauty of fields or pastures even on TV, instead telling his mother that places with grass are dangerous. Other mothers shared that their children often ask, "Isn't there any radiation here?" whenever their parents take them to play outside.

Save the Children also spoke to families with young children who have relocated due to the nuclear crisis. In these cases parents have reported their children have had difficulty adjusting to their new environments, with one case of a boy whose family has moved several times since the disaster, refusing to call his new house "home". He often asks his parents if they can all go back to what he called "home", the family's old house, now located in one of the restricted areas. At the same time, many parents of younger children also shared how their children have become less demanding, and have not been raising complaints on the numerous changes in their lives. Some mothers felt that their children seemed to understand the hardship and stress the parents have been under, and are therefore trying to adjust to the changes in their

environment without overly worrying their parents, trying to avoid additional stress or anxiety at home. During discussions with primary school children, several voiced that they have been noticing changes in their parents' behaviour. One ten year-old boy told Save the Children he feels as if his parents are always anxious and impatient without what he considers specific reasons, picking up on the stress his parents are showing one year on.

Children in primary schools have repeatedly said they are upset they can no longer play outdoors as they used to. The children's parents agreed that this was something their children were missing, and conveyed the fear that the restrictions on children's outdoor activities could have a negative impact on their children's psychological wellbeing as well as physical development. One mother from Fukushima City, still living there today, shared that her son's grades in physical education at school were below average for that time of year – and says her children travel to school only by car, as she is afraid of their potential exposure to radiation. Many parents listed providing access to safe environments for their children to play outdoors as a primary need for their children in the year since the disaster – and have made repeated efforts and their own expense to provide this access, at times travelling to remote areas with lower radiation levels for their children to be able to play outside. Other parents expressed the wish for play areas closer by where children could play and get some exercise indoors, where radiation risks are lower. Although some efforts exist to provide safe play areas for children within the Fukushima area, parents Save the Children spoke to feel these opportunities are still limited, and information on how to access these is not always readily available.

High school children have highlighted how much they miss their friends – for those who have had to relocate because of the nuclear crisis, they miss their friends back home – and for those who have stayed behind or returned, their schools feel empty as many teachers and classmates have left, and streets are empty as neighbours have moved to other parts of the country. Shops were closed or had reduced hours, their owners having left their businesses or had decreased staff after local populations left the area following the nuclear crisis. Children shared that not seeing younger kids playing in the parks or in their neighbourhoods, having empty houses on their streets, seeing local shops closed and abandoned, and other such changes, made them feel sad. At the same time, high school children who had returned to their hometowns were clear that despite these changes to their towns and the feeling of sadness that accompanied this, these children were on the whole happy to have gone back.

Returned and relocated children from this age group expressed how it's hard to continue thinking about radiation with so much uncertainty over the situation, as this

would make it harder to carry on and get through each day. One child also spoke about how even within his own family there are different positions on radiation, its risks to people living in Fukushima, and what people could do to protect themselves, causing added stress at home and increased uncertainty as to what to really believe.

Transferring to new school environment came out as the most important change for children who had relocated, who remembered their fears on whether they would fit in at their new school or get along with new peers. Another commonly expressed challenge these children shared is the change in their living environment, including less personal space in the smaller homes, loss of control over their own movement in urban areas where they cannot rely on their bicycles as much; and increased sirens and other loud noises that the children from rural areas were not used to. Relocated children interviewed preferred their hometowns to the areas they were currently living in, and missed the calm atmosphere and wide spaces they used to enjoy before the nuclear disaster.

Both groups of children raised concerns on the changes in their relationships with family and friends – some haven't been able to see family members anymore as either the children themselves have moved or their family members have; and friends have been separated as some children moved and some stayed behind. One boy worried that his friends back in his old neighbourhood would welcome him back as warmly as before if ever he did go back. Children who had stayed behind in their original homes, shared that they missed their friends who had left and wanted them to come back.

High school children on the whole had a more advanced understanding of radiation and potential risks of exposure as compared to the younger children. High school children spoken to reported taking specific measures to avoid exposure – including not having direct contact with soil or rainwater, or not drinking tap water. Some children answered that they did not worry about radiation the same way their parents did; while others expressed that they were too tired to keep thinking about it, and that they wouldn't be able to keep going and continue with their daily lives if they began worrying about radiation. On the whole children responded that although they talked a lot about radiation in the days following the nuclear crisis, it wasn't something they often talked about anymore amongst their friends.

Parents and children alike have expressed frustration at the uncertainty of the situation and lack of clarity on what the future will bring, finding it difficult to make decisions about their lives or the lives of their family, without knowing how the situation might change even in the coming months. Parents relocated to Iwaki for example did not know where they should enrol their children in the coming school year that starts in April; children were worried that changes in areas designated as

restricted or the closure of a satellite school would disrupt their education and prolong the already difficult adjustment period they have had to face.

One of the major points raised by both relocated children and children who had stayed in their original homes, is the fear of discrimination against Fukushima. Children shared their concerns that people outside Fukushima would have a negative image of their home prefecture as a result of radiation risks. One child expressed her fear by writing a message: “To the people all over the world, don’t look down on Fukushima.” Another girl declared that she wants Fukushima not only to be restored, but to be appreciated by others for its recovery efforts. Parents as well, wanted their children to grow up with pride for their native prefecture. One mother expressed that she does not want people outside Fukushima to label the people of Fukushima as “victims” for the sake of her children’s future. Many of the older children and the parents shared their wish for Fukushima to overcome its difficulties and be revitalized – becoming even better than it was before the disaster.

Parents on the whole were worried about their children’s exposure to radiation, and have been taking various steps to reduce the risks their children could face. These included limiting outdoor activities; decontamination measures in children’s playgrounds, schools, and streets; and limiting specific foods or sources of water. Parents also related their frustration at the lack of available information that they could rely on. Further, some parents felt that their living arrangements had an impact on the information they received – for example parents living in privately rented houses or apartments felt they received less information and support from official sources than those families living in temporary housing units. Many parents expressed distrust at the information they did receive on radiation, questioning the reliability of the information, and sharing their frustration at the impact this had on their ability to make informed decisions for their families – including for example what food to buy. Parents reported feeling that information available in the media or shared by specialists was often contradictory, resulting in increased anxiety on their part and extreme fatigue.

Many parents expressed dissatisfaction or distrust towards measures taken by the government. They feel that the decision-making processes could be more transparent, and shared various experiences where they had made inquiries and did not feel these were properly or satisfactorily addressed. The parents Save the Children spoke to were clear that they want their voices and opinions to be heard, responded to, and taken into account when decisions are made that concern them and their families.

Another feeling that prevailed among parents was that of unfairness and sometimes guilt. All parents interviewed shared the understanding that families in different situations have different needs, and that “fair treatment” did not mean providing uniform assistance to everyone however many parents expressed feeling that they were not fairly treated in comparison to other families in different settings. Several relocated parents – in particular those who chose to relocate on their own – confessed to feeling guilty towards families who had not relocated and continued to struggle with higher radiation levels, while they themselves continued to face physical, financial and psychological difficulties associated with relocation. Parents who had not relocated spoke of their fear that others would accuse them of letting their children continuously be exposed to radiation by staying where they were. Some spoke of their envy towards families that had been able to relocate, as it was perceived that these families had been given more support and received more attention.

All parents interviewed shared ongoing doubts on whether or not they were doing the right thing for their children, thinking and re-thinking their decisions and wondering whether it was the right one for their children in the long run. One mother expressed her desire that all parents should be provided with accurate information to be able to make their own decisions with confidence, while respecting the different decisions that others might make – and that overall necessary and appropriate support should be given to all parents affected, recognising their different needs. Parents also felt apprehensive at upcoming changes in the designation of affected areas, anticipating increased confusion and possibly further perceptions of unfairness among the different groups.

Looking to the future

Save the Children’s field research in Fukushima is one of the initial steps the agency has taken to inform its programmes for children and their families affected by the nuclear crisis. In addition to its field and desk research on Fukushima, Save the Children has been running activities for children in the Fukushima prefecture, including weekend and summer camps for children to have an opportunity to play outdoors further away from those places with higher levels of radiation, and organising field trips for hiking and other outdoors activities, in addition to film screenings and other fun, indoors activities. Save the Children will be setting up an office in Fukushima, from where it will run education, child protection and child participation activities for children as part of the agency’s wider five-year recovery programme.