

Children no longer play outdoors, as unseen radiation danger fuels anxiety of Fukushima children one year on

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TOKYO, March 7 2012. One year after the meltdown at Japan's nuclear power plants in Fukushima, new research by Save the Children shows that many children are afraid to play outside and live in fear of the unseen dangers of radiation.

The report published today called "Fukushima Families" found children and parents overwhelmingly spoke of their fear and anxiety around the impact of the nuclear crisis, and a lack of reliable information to help them make informed decisions and move forward with their lives.

"Last year's disaster has put children in a completely unprecedented situation – not only have they lost their homes or been separated from friends as a result of the earthquake and tsunami, but one year on they are still struggling with the anxiety prompted by the nuclear crisis," explained Save the Children's Annie Bodmer-Roy in Tokyo.

The children interviewed had little idea about what radiation is, what its effects are, and how to reduce exposure. Younger children agreed that radiation could be bad for them, but beyond that only knew that it was something you couldn't see, smell or touch – often looking to their parents to ask where they could play safely without having to fear radiation.

The Save the Children report also found that children have picked up on their parents' stress concerning the risks they may face. As a result many children that the child rights' agency spoke to expressed fear of playing outdoors, or frustration and sadness as their parents no longer allow them to play outside.

The agency is working with local communities and authorities in Fukushima to enable children to have safe places to play in areas further removed from radiation hot spots. However, older children interviewed for the research highlighted difficulties adjusting to their new environments. Those forced to flee their homes because of the nuclear crisis worried whether children at their new schools would accept them. They were equally anxious whether friends left behind would remain their friends. Those who did remain around Fukushima, said they were upset by the change in their environments, citing empty classrooms, abandoned homes in their neighbourhoods and an absence of children playing on the streets.

Parents in particular are afraid of making the wrong decisions for their children – those who have relocated as well as those who have stayed in their homes say that with little clear, reliable information available to them, they constantly fear making the wrong choices to ensure their children's wellbeing.

Outside of Fukushima, children and their families continue to face on-going challenges in recovering from last year's triple disaster. One year on, the biggest challenge for children is overcoming the emotional and psychological impact of the disaster.

While children are out of evacuation centres and back in school, the extreme emotional difficulties of the past year are still strongly felt. As nine-year old Honami explains, "The worst part wasn't when the tsunami hit, it was after. It takes a long time for things to get better."

Save the Children is implementing a five-year recovery programme in Japan to assist children's emotional and psychological recovery, support their education, and enable them to play an active role in rebuilding their towns.