

## Ami's tsunami story: one year on



Save the Children first met Ami and her mother in the weeks following the earthquake and tsunami that devastated their hometown of Ishinomaki, on the north eastern coast of Japan. At the time, Ami and her mother were living with hundreds of others in an evacuation centre, set up in a local school. Ami had been attending one of Save the Children's Child-Friendly Spaces set up as a special place for children to go to while staying at the evacuation centres, where they could do and have fun, and get away from the stress and anxiety of the overwhelming change.

After the initial months of the emergency phased into longer-term recovery, Save the Children closed down our Child-Friendly Spaces as one by one the evacuation centres closed and families moved into new accommodation.

We've kept in touch with Ami and her mother over the past year, learnt that they had moved to a new part of the country. Ami's mother Sayaka had found a new job at a different branch of her company, and Ami had enrolled into a new school.

One year after the earthquake and tsunami rocked their hometown, Save the Children met up with Ami and her mother in their new home to see how they were getting on.

"We came here in the middle of May. We've gotten used to life here, but with this

much snow, it's hard. But we manage to get by somehow. I've gotten used to my work, and gotten into the swing of things – like after work, I rush home to make dinner” Sayaka describes of her new life. “Ami is OK, she's enjoying school.”

Ami's mother says life in their new town in Yamagata, is not that bad – once you get used to the snow. “There is a supermarket and school near the house and there are many hospitals, it is not inconvenient at all. Only the snow is a bit of a trouble for us. Other than that, I think it's the same as Ishinomaki.”

Thinking back to the days after the earthquake and tsunami in Ishinomaki, Sayaka remembers the evacuation centre. “We all ate and slept in a school gymnasium, every day. At first, there was not enough aid, so sometimes we got hungry. But after, we got more than enough, and we really appreciated it. On top of the food, we were grateful for the play area that was made for children, and the people who were there to play with the children. The children would have gotten anxious without them.”

Without the support provided by Save the Children, Ami's mother says “the children would have stayed in the gymnasium the whole time. Of course, they would have played by themselves, but we wanted to have a place where the children could play more freely, with energy. We were very thankful.”

Recently Ami and her mother went back to Ishinomaki to visit their old neighbourhood and see family and friends. “The town centre looks as if there this disaster hadn't even happened – the rubble is all cleared. But, in the place very next to [the town centre] there is still a lot of rubble that remains. Seeing this, I realize again that it wasn't a dream.”

Sayaka says her landlord had told her that her old house would be demolished, as it had been too badly destroyed to try to reconstruct with what was left. “My landlord told me the house would be demolished, but I didn't know when. Now, it's all gone.”

“It had all been cleared when we went there over the holidays, and I couldn't find it right away. I had to just imagine that there had been a house there.” Thinking back to how she felt upon seeing the bare ground where her house once stood, Sayaka says “I felt lonely. I felt that everything had vanished.”

Although she doesn't regret going back to see where her old home was in Ishinomaki, Sayaka admits she doesn't have any plans to go back in the future or return to Ishinomaki to live. “I can't think of it now. Because we have gotten used to our life here, I think it's hard to go back there and change our lives again. So I intend to stay here for some time.”



One year on, Sayaka is trying to focus on the future. “When I was in Ishinomaki I was filled with concern because it hadn’t been decided that I would come here to work. I didn’t know what I was going to do. But after I moved here and started new life, I tried as hard as I can.”

“We had a lot of difficult things but we’re trying so hard to move forward right now. I live in a place far away from Ishinomaki, where the disaster was, and live a very normal life. We’ve gotten used to a life here and there is no problem. I’m OK. Even our friends in Ishinomaki seem to get used to the new life.” Looking back over the past year and how she’s changed the way she sees things, Sayaka says that now, “I am more positive than before, that’s probably the biggest change. With regards to her daughter, Sayaka says she’s been surprised at how resilient Ami is, and how well she’s adjusted to her new life. “For Ami, I think I put a bit more burden on her, but she has grown up” in the past year. Sayaka pauses as she thinks of how her daughter has reacted to the changes in her life. “Children can get used to the new situation in their own way. They get accustomed to school quickly. I think children are stronger than adults.”



## Ami

Ami is very quiet and smiles shyly when asked how she likes her new home.

With all the snow in her new town in Yamagata, Ami says she's started going outside and playing in the snow – but admits she was surprised by all the snow when winter fell in her new neighbourhood. “We make snowmen and have snow-ball fights.” She says she's made lots of friends in her new town, but still keeps in touch with her old school friends back in Ishinomaki. She's forgotten the details of her time living in the evacuation centre, but remembers Misato, one of the friends she made at the Child-Friendly Space set up by Save the Children. “We played tag”, remembering the times she spent playing with her friends at the centre. She remembers how she used to play cards with her friends, but doesn't remember how to play “Uno”. Instead, her new favourites are called “Speed” “Banana” and “Page One”, which she loves playing with her mother.



Last time we spoke to Ami, she said she wanted to be a cartoon illustrator, making Japanese “manga” cartoons. Today, Ami has decided she has a new dream. “I want to be a patisserie chef, because I like to make cakes.” She's been practicing making cakes with her mother, and already knows which ones she'd like to make: “I'm going to make cheesecake and shortcake.” She gets out her favourite toys that she plays with these days, showing off her miniature plastic cakes and desserts.

Despite changing her dream job for the future, Ami says she still likes drawing, shows the pictures hanging on the wall of her favourite cartoon characters she's drawn.



**Photos:**

Page 1: Ami, 7, with her mother Sayaka Ohara at the evacuation centre at Kazuma elementary school, where the family stayed for two months after their home was destroyed in the tsunami. Photo: Philip Crabtree / Save the Children

Page 3: One year after the disaster, Ami and her mother are settling well into their new home in Yamagata. Photo: Annie Bodmer-Roy / Save the Children

Page 4: Ami and her mother were separated for four days after the earthquake and tsunami. One year on, mother and daughter are reunited and living happily together in their new home. Photo: Annie Bodmer-Roy / Save the Children

Page 5: Ami plays with her new favourite toys, miniature plastic cakes and desserts, explaining her new dream of being a patisserie chef. Annie Bodmer-Roy/ Save the Children

Page 6: Ami still enjoys drawing, showing off some of her recent work hanging on the wall. Photo: Annie Bodmer-Roy / Save the Children