

“Even though we are children, we still have ideas”



Ryota Konno is in grade six at Southern Yamada Elementary School in Iwate, northeastern Japan. When the earthquake and tsunami hit Japan last March, Ryota’s house and much of his neighbourhood was destroyed, and Ryota had to move into temporary housing with his family.

One year later, Ryota is still living in temporary housing, and through Save the Children’s Child-Led Club, has been playing an active role in the recovery process – how the town should be rebuilt to better suit children’s needs.

Save the Children sat down with Ryota and his mother to talk about his experience over the past year, recovering from the earthquake and tsunami, moving to a new home in the temporary housing community, and on participating in his town’s recovery process.

Today, Ryota says that things are getting better. When asked what he wanted to say to those outside of Japan, wondering how he’s doing, Ryota says “I would tell them that we are doing much better now. My life is changing, it’s getting better than before.”

He explains that in the days and weeks after the earthquake and tsunami, when all the shops were reduced to rubble, “it took half an hour to go get food or clothes – everybody used to drive 30 to 50 minutes just to get groceries and other supplies – but now we can get it here in our town, we have stores here now.”

Despite this progress, however, Ryota acknowledges that the past year has been difficult for children – and some problems remain one year later.

Looking back over the past year, Ryota explains “[it’s been a] very severe experience for children in Yamada. The hardest part has been the tsunami.”

In the weeks following the tsunami, temporary houses were set up to house families displaced by the disaster, and today close to 320,000 people are living in temporary accommodation. Although this provides much needed shelter and accommodation for children, Ryota explains that the new housing communities have been built in parks and schoolyards, limiting the space children have to play.

“Now that they have built a temporary housing in the park, it took away our playground. There are only a few parks to begin with, but now they built temporary houses in the park, and it’s taking up the half of the space.”

Ryota’s mother agrees, and says this is particularly the case for children who lost their homes and had to move into temporary housing, like Ryota. “There seems to be a wall between those who lost their homes and those who did not. Life went back to normal for the children who didn’t lose their house. They started playing just like before, while the children living in the temporary shelter are all scattered and now live in places that they are unfamiliar with. The most important thing for the children now is to have a play time with their friends.”

Ryota agrees, and says in particular, “I wish there were more playgrounds for children.” He also explains that with so many children having moved to different temporary housing communities, “it takes a long time to get to school, so we don’t have time to play with friends. Some children don’t get to play with other children who live far away.”



Today, Ryota is living one of the children living far away – staying in a new part of town he had never visited before the disaster. “I had never been there before. It’s really, really cold. It’s so cold that sometimes even the water pipe freezes – but I do feel relieved that we haven’t had a Tsunami there.”

Thinking about where the tsunami hit and the devastation it caused, Ryota explains how, last year, he felt he should do something to help rebuild his town.

“Because our town has been totally destroyed, it has nothing, I kept wondering if there is anything we – the children – could do to help. It is important for us because Yamada is our town, this is where we used to live. It needs to be recovered by us.”

When one of Save the Children’s staff members first told Ryota about the Club, he wanted to try it out.

“From the first visit [to the Club], I was really interested. So I came back the next day and the day after that, and I’m still going today to express my opinion, share my ideas. I enjoy expressing myself, and listening to other people’s opinions. I like it, it’s really fun.”



When he first started out with the club, Ryota admits he didn’t feel like he could express his ideas. Over the past year as he’s participated in the Club, Ryota’s self-confidence has grown. Now, he is one of the leaders of the group.

“Before, I wanted to speak out but I couldn’t. I wanted to recommend some ideas, but I couldn’t say anything. Now, I can now speak out naturally, and express my own opinions.”

Ryota’s mother has also noticed a change in her son since he started participating in Save the Children’s Child-Led Club. “The principle of Ryota’s school said that he has changed a lot. He told us that Ryota started to express his opinions. In fact, Ryota asked him if there is anything he could do for the Philippines flood. I think he sees the news differently. As a matter of fact, he sees everything differently. He is more active now,

and I think he built up his confidence through the activities with Save the Children. Now he can think ahead and figure out what to do to get the result that he wants.”

Ryota thinks that it’s not just him that’s changing, but that adults’ attitudes towards children’s participation is starting to change in Japan, and adults are starting to pay more attention to what children have to say. “Now, there have been occasions where my opinions were adopted.”

“Even though we are children, we still have ideas. I think they want to hear our thoughts and ideas and take them into consideration.”



During one recent summit Save the Children organised for children to present their ideas, Ryota was chosen amongst his peers to be one of the ones to present their ideas – to an audience of over 200 people, including national government and even the Princess. “I like giving presentations because they provide me with a great opportunity to be heard by the adults.”

Ryota’s mother agrees, and believes it’s important for children to participate in the recovery process in post-tsunami Japan “because they can understand the situation better. Also, it helps them to figure out what they are going to do with their life. By participating the rebuilding process, they become hopeful. I believe that they are going to be well aware of the fact that their generation will be the one to rebuild and that they are going to make it happen.”

“I think clearing the debris and rebuilding the area helps children’s healing process since it gives them hope. They become creative through creating something from nothing and from figuring out what needs to be done to achieve the goal. It’s like watching a tree

growing from a seed. I think this process works well for their psychological recovery. They start having dreams such as living in a better house in the future. So the whole process makes them feel positive and hopeful. They may have been feeling down, but it helps them to move forward.”

Ryota explains, “I think it’s good to think on our own, make ourselves heard, write a report, and express our thoughts, our ideas to the adults,” and adds, “I think what we are doing now for the recovery plan is actually helping the adults to rebuild.”

This will always be important – not only now in the recovery, but also in the future. I think it helps to make our town better if our ideas are listened to and valued. Our town can be like what it used to be.”

One idea Ryota had to make his town better looks at how to improve disaster warnings in the future, helping keep people safe the next time disaster strikes. Explaining his idea, he says “the alerts that warn of disasters should be changed to different colours” depending on the disaster – if it’s an earthquake, it could be one colour, but if it’s a tsunami warning, a different colour. “It will help people evacuate by changing the colour of the siren for the people who cannot hear, and making the alert loud for people who cannot see. The government authorities liked Ryota’s idea, and included it in their report for Yamada’s recovery plan.

Ryota has learnt in the past year that there are different ways to stay safe if an earthquake or tsunami hits. Sharing his experience with others, he says “follow the advice that other people give you. If there is nobody around to tell you what to do, then judge on your own what to do, and evacuate - to a higher ground or a safer place on your own in case of Tsunami warning. Also, you need to stay calm.”

Thinking of his own safety and wellbeing one year after the disaster, Ryota confesses he would like to live higher up, further from risk if ever another tsunami strikes Yamada.

“I want to live on a hill. Because of what I have gone through – I don’t want to experience it again – so I want to move to a higher place where I can feel safe. I think it depends on the person, but for me, I think it’s better to live higher up.”

PHOTOS:

Page 1: Ryota has fun with his friends as he participates in the local Child-Led Club set up by Save the Children in Yamada, Iwate prefecture, northeastern Japan. Photo: Annie Bodmer-Roy/Save the Children

Page 2: Ryota stands in the entrance to his new home, one of the new temporary houses erected in Yamada. Photo: Annie Bodmer-Roy/Save the Children

Page 3: Ryota participates in one of Save the Children’s workshops back in August, not long after he first joined the Child-Led Club. Together with other children from the Child-Led Club, Ryota came up with and presented his ideas on how to rebuild his hometown, destroyed by the earthquake and tsunami. Photo: Zets / Save the Children