

Tohoku region earthquake: what is happening to people's life?

How to cure children's psychological pain

◇Children starting to wet their pants and overly attach to parents, normal reactions/ Don't stop 'disaster play'

Translated by SEEDS Asia

Original Source: 「東日本大震災：暮らしはどうなる？／10 子どもの心、癒やすには」

From Mainichi.jp

28/3/2011

<http://mainichi.jp/select/weathernews/news/20110328ddm013040019000c.html>

After Tohoku region earthquake, many children are suffering from significant psychological pain as they saw their house swept away right in front of them and lost their members of family. Some children, even though residing away from the disaster stricken area, are also emotionally unstable due to aftershock, electricity cut and endless report on earthquake and radiation disaster. How should we cure psychological pain of children?

'My favorite racing car was swept all away by tsunami.' In Yuriage, Natori-shi, Miyagi, a lot of houses were damaged by tsunami flowing to residential areas. Natori middle high school is one of the evacuee sites and a 5-year-old boy staying in the site told the story to a news reporter. The boy is holding toys of patrol car and ambulance, which he got from the evacuee site. Later, the boy ran around and came back and started to talk to himself: 'My father is not here because he was swept away.' 'If I said "don't run" instead of "run" what would have happened to everybody.' His mother, 40, said in an anxious manner: 'He seems like enjoying himself because he can spend time with family all the time, but he has difficult time to sleep at night and he started not to be able to go to toilet by himself. I am not sure whether it is because of the effect of tsunami, but he started to be attached to us more than before.'

Children who experienced fearful time, they sometimes start to act in unusual behavior such as over attachment, wetting pants and excessive reaction to loud sound. If children's ages are below school age, they can act as if they are back to baby. Because children cannot judge their surrounding situation objectively, they increase their insecure feelings when they see adults being upset. While adults can soon become calm and foresee reconstruction of the lives, children cannot understand in the same way and feel more stressed. The children need support from adults.

Ms. Kamiyama, a professor at Yamagata University, living in Tagajo-shi Miyagi, she created a play area at one corner of the evacuee area in Tagajo cultural center with her student volunteers. She named the area 'Children's land'. Ms. Kamiyama said that 'In order for the children to be cured from the pain, they need a place where they can spend quiet time.' As for over attachment and wetting the pants, 'It is very common behavior in the emergency situation', she said.

'Disaster Play' is one of the reactions of children who got affected from the earthquake. They do 'earthquake play' by destroying toy building blocks and they do 'funeral play'. Ms. Usui, a professor of Social Psychology at Niigata Seiryō University explained that such disaster play is one of the frantic and instinct efforts of the children to cure their pain resulting from seeing too harsh reality. Adults tend to scold at children, as their play

is perceived as immoral. However Ms.Usui said 'Please support the children with understanding. If they seem to disturb others, suggest children in calm manner to change the place where they play.'

At places outside disaster stricken area, there are children who become insecure. Ms. Honda, a professor of Social Psychology at Waseda University said that children with age up until 2nd year and 3rd year of elementary school, their ability to understand their surrounding reality is not developed yet and they need extra care. It is better to avoid children from seeing news too much and explain them with details such as 'We do not have water problem as we have a source.' and ease their restless feeling.

It is important for the adults not to be too nervous. Mr.Kuraishi, a professor of Clinical Welfare at Mukogawa University said 'For children living outside disaster stricken area, keep the normal life/routine of their study and play.' People tend to refrain from enjoying entertainment as a consideration of the victims. However in order to get the normal daily life, fun experience is essential. Usually children will gradually become calm but if the children keep behaving unusually for more than 3 months, it is advised to see specialists of Pediatrics and Psychosomatic Medicine.

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