

Chapter 11

Children

11-1 Children’s Issues in Miyagi

 Introduction

It is impossible to talk about Miyagi Prefecture today without mentioning the Great East Japan Earthquake.

Perhaps it was my encounter with the Human Security Forum, a non-profit organization that provided learning support for children at a temporary housing community hall in Tome City after the earthquake, which led me to write this article.

The Human Security Forum’s Human Security Index had ranked Miyagi 45th out of Japan’s 47 prefectures. I had concerns about what would be gained by assessing the SDG status of Miyagi, which still bears the scars of the disaster today even ten years after the Great East Japan Earthquake. Nevertheless, I accepted the request to write this article because I want Japan to become a society that puts the interests of children first, rather than one in which children are left until last in the face of successive disasters. From the standpoint of someone who has been involved in NPO activities related to children and childcare in Miyagi for more than 20 years, I would like to reflect on the issues facing children in the prefecture.

 1 Miyagi and Children through History

A child’s upbringing is strongly influenced by the local culture. In this section, I have intentionally used the term “Miyagi” because one can get a better understanding of the current SDG assessment by getting a sense of the local climate and culture, rather than looking at it from the administrative perspective of “Miyagi Prefecture.”

Inspired by works such as Miekichi Suzuki’s *Akai Tori*

(“Red Bird”), local adults began publishing the children’s song magazine *Otento-san* in the 1900s, which gave rise to a children’s culture movement rooted in the local community. Students and leading cultural figures in Miyagi engaged with children and developed various activities for them. Later, after the hardships of World War II, many original “Tohoku songs” were composed to encourage children growing up in the post-war period. The children’s singing in the Sendai Broadcasting Children’s Choir, which was played on the radio, also provided comfort to adults.

While Tohoku is blessed with a rich natural environment, the region has always been beset by disasters such as typhoons, floods, and earthquakes. As such, there is a long history of people living together with nature, patiently rebuilding their lives each time there is some kind of damage.

Miyagi also experienced the waves of modernization and consolidation that swept over the country in the past. As a result of the national policy of merging municipalities during the Heisei Era (1989–2019), the number of municipalities in the prefecture was cut in half, from 71 in March 2003 to 35 in 2009 (Table 11-1). These mergers resulted in bigger administrative districts and major changes in people’s lives. The integration of schools and hospitals made some people more vulnerable, as they faced longer distances to their workplaces, schools, and hospitals, and the decrease in the number of pediatricians, obstetricians, and gynecologists further compounded the declining trend in the number of children. Some experts also say that the increased size of administrative districts made the recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake take longer than it should have.

The number of births in Miyagi Prefecture continued to decline until 2009 when it appeared to have leveled

Table 11-1: Mergers of Municipalities in the Heisei-Era

Date	Cities	Towns	Villages	Total municipalities	Before merger	After merger
April 1, 2003	10	57	2	69	Nakaniida Town, Onoda Town, Miyazaki Town	Kami Town
April 1, 2005	13	31	1	45	Hasama Town, Toyoma Town, Towa Town, Nakada Town, Toyosato Town, Yoneyama Town, Ishikoshi Town, Minamikata Town, Tsuyama Town	Tome City
					Tsukidate Town, Wakayanagi Town, Kurikoma Town, Takashimizu Town, Ichihasama Town, Semine Town, Uguisuzawa Town, Kannari Town, Shiwahime Town, Hanayama Village	Kurihara City
					Yamoto Town, Naruse Town	Higashi-Matsushima City
					Ishinomaki City, Kahoku Town, Ogatsu Town, Kanan Town, Monou Town, Kitakami Town, Oshika Town	Ishinomaki City
October 1, 2005	13	30	1	44	Shizugawa Town, Utatsu Town	Minami-Sanriku Town
January 1, 2006	13	29	1	43	Kogota Town, Nango Town	Misato Town
March 31, 2006	13	22	1	36	Furukawa City, Matsuyama Town, Sanbongi Town, Kashimadai Town, Iwadeyama Town, Naruko Town, Tajiri Town	Osaki City
					Kesennuma City, Karakuwa Town	Kesennuma City
September 1, 2009	13	21	1	35	Kesennuma City, Motoyoshi Town	Kesennuma City

out, but then declined again in 2011 in the wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake. However, in 2012 and 2013, the number of children on childcare waiting lists temporarily increased due to an uptick in the number

of births and the inability of kindergartens and nursery schools to operate due to the disaster. The total fertility rate continues to decline today, but we must also consider the prefecture's unique situation: about half of the prefecture's population is concentrated in Sendai, which became an ordinance-designated city in 1989.

Figure 11-1: Former Miyagi Central Children's Center



The importance that Miyagi places on children is manifested in the Miyagi Central Children's Center, a groundbreaking facility established in 1958. It relocated to a new building in 1965 which had a children's library, gymnasium, and outdoor cooking facilities.

There were also overnight training programs for Junior Leaders (members of youth groups who conduct community activities in conjunction with the "Children's Associations" that began around 1965), as well as extensive volunteer activities by high school, university, and vocational school students. Many of the people who were trained in these programs are now working to support Miyagi Prefecture today. The Children's Center, which included a children's playground with a huge play structure designed by architect Mitsuru Senda, attracted nationwide attention. However, as Japanese society shifted its focus from welfare to the economy, a petition to preserve the facility was unsuccessful, and due

to aging facilities, it fell out of use from the 2000s onwards before closing in March 2013. When the Great East Japan Earthquake struck, many people who had grown up here went to the disaster area to help. Some say that better support could have been provided for the children if the Children’s Center had been there to serve as a base of operations.

After the disaster, it seemed as though people would no longer be able to live in the affected areas, but after a while, there were reports that local festivals were being revived across the prefecture. Footage from the reports followed the adults who worked hard to revive these festivals, and also showed children participating in the preparations and taking on roles appropriate for their age. The festivals were more than just events; they were opportunities for communities to connect, and for children to work alongside adults as colleagues. For many years, children in Miyagi have been raised in the “cradle” of the local community.

At evacuation centers after the disaster, junior high and high school students helped however they could, distributing supplies, making and putting up newspaper posters, or playing with small children. Many of them were Junior Leaders. Even though the Children’s Center was no longer there, its activities continued. Many teachers, government officials, and local business owners in Miyagi Prefecture have had experience as Junior Leaders, and they all speak enthusiastically about those days. The organization of Junior Leaders, like local festivals, had a long history as a place for children to grow up, following in the footsteps of their predecessors. As such, it also played a major role as a source of encouragement for adults during the disaster.

Although the “cradles” for raising children in Miyagi may have been temporarily lost or transformed, they endure to this day.

2 Activities to Protect Children’s Rights in Miyagi

After the Government of Japan ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, several national conferences on children were held in Miyagi Prefecture, expanding the network of organizations working with children in the prefecture. In 2010, the executive committee of the “Convention on the Rights of the Child Forum,” a private-sector-led forum held annually in various locations,

was formed with the NPO Childline Miyagi as its core. A total of 1,606 participants from all over Japan gathered in Sendai to learn together. Just when we thought that we could move forward and build on these accomplishments, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck.

In the aftermath of the disaster, everywhere I went, including evacuation centers and temporary housing in coastal areas, I met people engaged in activities for children even though they themselves had been affected by the disaster and were facing difficult circumstances. This served to further expand the circle of organizations working to support children.

Often during the disaster, when I was feeling frustrated that I was not able to do as much as I wanted, I felt that Tohoku was regarded as a backward region in terms of children’s rights by NGOs and NPOs who came from outside the prefecture and abroad to provide support. There were also cases of friction between outside supporters and local groups regarding support for children in the affected areas. Having experienced being both a *provider of support* as well as a *recipient of support* (as we were located in an inland area with relatively little damage, and relayed outside assistance to the affected areas on the coast), I would like to pass on some of the lessons we learned.

3 Children in the Wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake

(1) In Evacuation Centers

The front page of the Sendai-based *Kahoku Shimpo* (newspaper) still carries a daily report on the number of people killed or missing in the Great East Japan Earthquake (compiled by the National Police Agency and other organizations; figures for disaster-related deaths are based on *Kahoku Shimpo* surveys). As of November 1, 2021, for Miyagi Prefecture, the number of deaths was listed as 9,544, the number of missing as 1,213, and the number of other disaster-related deaths as 929. This indicates that a great many children have faced the death of someone close to them, or are still in a state of “ambiguous loss” whereby they are waiting for a family member or friend who is still classified as missing.

The presence of children in the evacuation centers was

not very welcome, and there was a lack of understanding about children who cried with anxiety or continued to play make-believe games about the earthquake and tsunami. Childline Miyagi had to suspend operations of the Childline telephone service from March to July 2011, but the national Childline was there to listen to the anguished voices of children in the affected areas. To protect their children, many families left the shelters and returned to their damaged homes, or moved to other areas, relying on relatives and others to help them.

(2) In Temporary Housing

When construction of temporary housing began, the joy of moving in was short-lived. In these prefabricated units, houses were separated only by a thin board, so conversations could easily be heard from next door, and children's footsteps would echo through the steel frames to three houses away. It was not a carefree environment for children. The grounds of the temporary housing were used for parking, with cars frequently coming and going, and children were told off for playing there. In addition,

there were no places for them to play because local parks and school playgrounds were being used as temporary housing.

Most of the departments responsible for temporary housing were those that dealt with elderly and disabled people, so they did not have an accurate grasp of the number of children when people moved in. **Table 11-2** was compiled from a survey commissioned by Childline Miyagi in March 2016. At least 3,044 children had been living in temporary housing for more than five years, and 606 had spent five years of infancy there. The children, however, never complained. They instinctively knew that if they did, they would only upset their parents, and that there was nothing that could be done about it anyway. However, their patience could not last indefinitely, and problems between children frequently broke out at school, leading to more and more children stopping from regularly attending school. From 2016 to 2019, rates of non-attendance among elementary and junior high school students in Miyagi Prefecture were the worst in the country.

Table 11-2: Number of children who lived in temporary housing (based on a survey of support centers in each municipality, as of March 2016)

	Number of children	Age																		
		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Sendai	93	0	4	3	4	2	5	2	5	3	8	3	4	6	7	6	8	6	9	8
Ishinomaki	1,131	6	17	40	61	61	52	51	52	50	74	55	61	67	78	71	74	74	100	87
Shiogama	21	0	0	2	0	2	0	2	1	2	2	1	1	1	2	0	1	2	1	1
Kesenuma	617	5	4	16	29	28	37	31	35	27	29	25	30	40	44	45	54	50	47	41
Natori	94	0	3	4	4	2	5	11	1	6	2	4	6	4	8	8	5	10	4	7
Tagajo	42	1	2	0	4	3	3	0	2	3	3	1	2	3	2	2	2	1	5	3
Iwanuma	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tome	58	0	0	2	3	1	4	2	5	2	2	3	2	2	2	8	4	6	6	4
Higashi-Matsushima	240	5	9	6	15	7	10	12	13	18	11	19	15	10	18	14	16	10	17	15
Watari	27	0	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	3	1	2
Yamamoto	73	0	1	1	2	2	4	3	2	0	2	4	6	5	7	2	11	5	7	9
Shichigahama	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	3	2	0	1	0
Osato	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Misato	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Onagawa	282	12	12	8	12	17	9	11	9	14	7	12	17	13	18	25	26	27	16	17
Minami-Sanriku	358	1	2	4	11	19	11	13	13	19	27	23	25	25	17	23	26	31	38	30
Total	3,044	30	55	87	147	146	141	140	139	147	168	153	170	177	204	208	231	225	252	224

Further weighing on these children’s minds was the consolidation of schools (Table 11-3). The consolidation of schools in Miyagi Prefecture was already underway due to the falling number of children and municipal mergers, but the Great East Japan Earthquake further accelerated this process. The loss of schools that had served as hubs for local communities brought a great sense of loss, not only for the children but also for local residents.

Table 11-3: Number of school closures in Miyagi Prefecture following the disaster

	Elementary schools	Junior high schools
Sendai	7	
Ishinomaki	12	3
Kesennuma	6	1
Natori	1	1
Higashi-Matsushima	4	2
Watari	1	
Yamamoto	1	
Onagawa	3	2
Minami-Sanriku	1	1
Total	35	10

(3) Children Born After the Disaster

Children born after the disaster were often described by nursery school and kindergarten teachers as “hyperactive and short-tempered” and “somehow different from previous children.” Similar comments are now heard at schools. Even small children intuitively understand situations in which adults are at their limits, and so they try their best to be “good.” It may be that as the recovery process moved forward and adults began rebuilding their lives, the emotions that children had unconsciously held back until then came to the surface. But experts say that that alone does not explain their characteristics.

At the “Review meeting of support operations by Support Center (2017)” conducted by Childline Miyagi on behalf of the prefecture, Professor Tomoaki Adachi of the Faculty of Education at Miyagi Gakuin Women’s University, stated that:

“The most important time for forming attachments is when a child is between 1 and 2 years old, but because the parents were not in a position to affirm their emotional

bonds at that time, children have grown up with unstable attachment as a result. Their tolerance for emotional trauma is weakened, a situation known as developmental trauma disorder. Among the challenges faced by children born after the disaster are problems in attachment formation, a result of not being able to build resilience against trauma.”

He also pointed out that:

“There are many cases in which, as with abuse, a lack of attachment formation at the time of the disaster causes a child to exhibit impulsive, aggressive, and restless speech and behavior. These issues are often mistreated as a developmental disorder, and are therefore not properly addressed in school settings.”

Accordingly, children in this age group will require close monitoring going forward.

(4) Parents Who Lived Through the Disaster as Children

The generation that was in high school at that time is now a generation of parents, raising children of their own. Recently, people involved in childcare support have expressed concerns about people in this age group, who have become parents but who still have unhealed mental scars. After the disaster, many people relocated to inland areas, making it difficult for those providing support to connect with such parents, because their identities were not known, and they did not talk about having lived through the disaster. As such, there are concerns about the impact on the upbringing of their children.

4 Children in Miyagi Prefecture Today

(1) Problems at School

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)’s *AY2020 Survey on Problem Behavior and Other Student Guidance Issues*, Miyagi Prefecture has higher figures than the national average for every problem examined (as shown in Table 11-4). Non-attendance at school, in particular, remained the highest in Japan until 2020. However, incidents of bullying and dropping out of high school are on the decline.

Table 11-4: Children's situation in Miyagi Prefecture

Category	Cases	Rate per 1,000 people		
		Miyagi Prefecture	National average	National ranking
Violence (elementary, junior high, and high school)	2,001	8.5%	5.1%	8th
Bullying (elementary, junior high, high school, special needs school)	12,902	54.2%	39.7%	10th
Non-attendance (elementary and junior high school)	3,921	22.6%	20.5%	8th (4 prefectures tied)
High school dropouts	714	1.2%	1.1%	10th (2 prefectures tied)

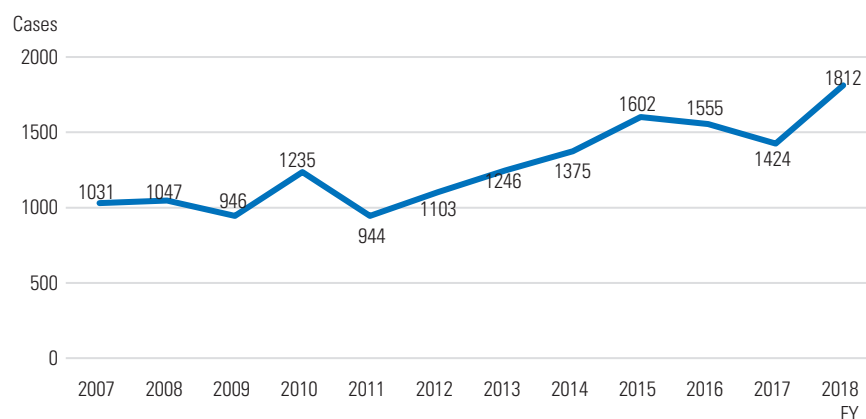
Source: MEXT "AY2020 Survey on Problem Behavior and Other Student Guidance Issues"

(2) Child Abuse

The number of consultations regarding child abuse in Miyagi Prefecture and Sendai City dipped briefly in FY2011, but then increased sharply, with a gradual decline starting in 2015, followed by a sharp increase in FY2018 (Figure 11-2). There are several possible reasons for the decline in consultations in FY2011, including the disaster (which made it difficult to seek a consultation). Another reason is that although abuse was relatively easy

to identify in the densely packed living environment of temporary housing, it tended to be dealt with by the residents themselves or by temporary housing support staff, with few people contacting the Child Welfare Center. The sharp increase in 2018 has been attributed to an increase in "witnessing domestic violence" in the psychological abuse category. It is important to emphasize that abuse occurs within the secluded environment of the home, and can result in children not attending school, depression, and even suicide.

Figure 11-2: Number of cases of abuse in Miyagi Prefecture



Source: Childcare Support Division, Health and Welfare Department, Miyagi Prefectural Government

Table 11-5: Number of consultations on child abuse in Miyagi Prefecture (by type)

FY		FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018
Number of consultations		1,246	1,375	1,602	1,555	1,424	1,812
Type of abuse	Physical abuse	371	406	425	424	379	450
	Neglect	226	288	327	282	271	382
	Sexual abuse	30	29	18	9	12	26
	Psychological abuse (total)	619	652	832	840	762	954
	Of which witnessing domestic violence	394	388	449	496	449	—
	%	64 %	60 %	54 %	59 %	59 %	—

Source: Compiled by the author based on materials from the Childcare Support Division, Health and Welfare Department, Miyagi Prefecture and the Miyagi Prefectural Police Department’s “Domestic Violence Countermeasures Promotion Project”

5 Issues Facing Children in Miyagi Prefecture and Measures to Address Them

In the previous sections, I examined the situation of children in Miyagi before and after the 2011 disaster.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out just as signs of post-disaster recovery were beginning to emerge. While recognizing that the pandemic threw schools into disarray and caused great emotional stress to children, here I would like to focus on the current issues facing Miyagi’s children and offer some recommendations for future directions.

Proposal 1. Safe places for children to spend time in peace!

If home or school are not places where a child feels safe, then an alternative place for them to spend time should be found. Since loneliness and isolation can lead to suicide, we must strengthen cooperation among the education sector, the welfare sector, and the private sector, and provide a variety of places such as playgrounds, free schools, children’s centers, learning support centers, and community activities to ensure that children have places to spend time, in keeping with their circumstances.

Proposal 2. Train a diverse workforce for children!

The presence of adults whom children trust is essential for establishing such places. There is a need for social workers

who are aware of children’s problems and have the skills to connect families, schools, and government services to resolve such problems, as well as to provide urgent help when the need arises. Compared to school social workers who are usually employed by education-related departments, children’s social workers work from a welfare perspective, acting as “child advocates” from the child’s point of view.

Proposal 3. Provide more information to children!

Although 18-year-olds are now legally considered adults, children are not fully aware that they will be held responsible as adults for matters in which they were previously treated as minors, such as harm caused through social media, unexpected pregnancies, and financial damages. They also do not have a good understanding of where to turn for help when faced with problems such as abuse, domestic violence, and poverty. Children need to be repeatedly given accurate information from as early an age as possible.

Proposal 4. Establish systems for preventing abuse and helping children!

Child Welfare Centers are places to report abuse, and the National Child Consultation Hotline “Dial 189” is now well-known. However, some children hesitated to contact Childline after seeing reports of children who were not saved despite the involvement of Child Welfare Centers. Questions have also been raised as to whether the staff who respond to “Dial 189” calls are capable of listening to what the child has to say. In Miyagi Prefecture, there

is only one Child Welfare Center in Sendai City, a city of one million people, and temporary shelters have limited capacity. Consideration should be given to setting up more facilities as soon as possible.

Proposal 5. Improve understanding and support for non-attendance at school!

Children do not have an obligation to go to school; they have the right to learn. Since adults have an obligation to ensure that their children receive an education, consideration should be given to creating environments in which every child can learn. Some parents who send their children to private “free schools” have asked for financial support, and we hope that this will lead to cooperation between the government and the private sector, taking the best interests of the child into account.

Conclusion: Make Miyagi a Place Where Young People Can Live in Hope and Raise Their Children with Peace of Mind!

After the Great East Japan Earthquake, many of the children who lived through the disaster felt a strong desire to do something for their damaged hometowns, but there was not enough support for them to do so, and many were forced to leave. Although reconstruction has progressed and many young people have returned to the affected areas, there is not yet an adequate environment in place for raising children, such as hospitals, schools, and nurseries. Planned projects were called off or scaled down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic situation has also become more difficult. On the other hand, there have been some success stories, such as the revitalization of traditional industries through IT. There are many examples of young people who came to Miyagi to help after the disaster and are now playing an active role in the prefecture.

In any case, what must be done now is to create an environment for children and young people to put down roots in Miyagi and live happily. Communities that are friendly to children will be friendly to everyone.

Written by Junko Kobayashi

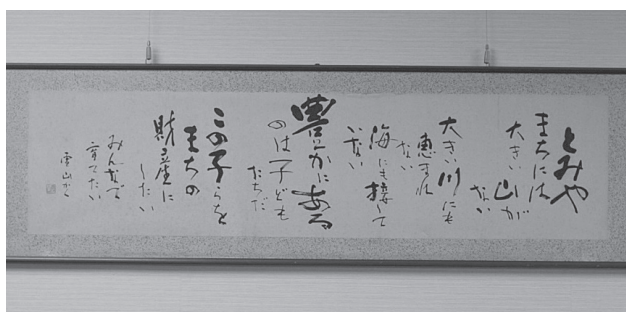
11-2 Tomiya City’s Child Friendly City Initiative

1 Profile of Tomiya City

Tomiya is located in the center of Miyagi Prefecture, on the northern side of Sendai. Although it has a 400-year history as a post town on the Oshu-Kaido highway, its streets are also lined with newly developed residential areas. Having grown from a village to a town, the population kept rising, and in 2016, it was officially designated a city. Today, the population is approximately 52,000, of which around 16% are aged 14 or under. As such, the city has a high proportion of children and has many households raising children.

With regard to childcare support, the Tomiya Childcare Support Center (*Tomikoko*), which opened in April 2017 as one of the city’s key projects, provides seamless support from pregnancy and throughout the child-raising period. The city also opened centers for early childhood education and care and secured childcare workers, thereby achieving zero children on waiting lists in FY2018, FY2020, and FY2021.

❖ Figure 11-3: A plaque in the mayor’s office of Tomiya City



On the wall of the mayor’s office hangs a plaque that reads, “Tomiya has no great mountains, no great rivers, and no access to the sea; what it has in abundance is its children.” These are the words of Teruo Wako, former mayor of Tomiya town, put into calligraphy by Akio Kasashima (Setsuzan), a former elementary school principal (Figure 11-3). This shows that although Tomiya City is not in an ideal geographical position, it has always had a tradition of carefully nurturing its children as “the town’s assets.”

2 A Japanese Approach to UNICEF’s Child Friendly Cities and Communities Initiative (CFCI)

In partnership with the Japan Committee for UNICEF (JCU), Tomiya City has been participating in the Child Friendly Cities Initiative Working Group since January 2017. The first objective of this working group was to determine the effectiveness of the revised version of the Japan-style Child Friendly Cities and Communities Initiative (CFCI) checklist, and the second apply the checklist taking Tomiya as a model municipality and reflect the results in the review process. While participating in this working group, we explored questions such as “Is Tomiya a child-friendly city?” and “What does it mean to undertake a child-friendly city development project?”

Through this process, we became aware of several issues and challenges, both positive and negative. These included:

- A bird’s eye view of current city projects and activities reveals specific issues
- By becoming a model-testing municipality, we can receive cooperation from the JCU in the form of advice, staff, training for citizens, and so on
- Tips can be obtained on issues such as child poverty, creating places for children to spend time, bullying, and measures to address falling numbers of children
- There is a need to create an awareness of children’s human rights across all agencies
- The time and workload required for activities are unclear, making it difficult to assign personnel, etc.
- With broad topics and no national mandates, motivating staff is a challenge
- There is a need to develop mechanisms to promote the participation of residents and children

What should we aim for with the CFCI program? What are the short-term and long-term perspectives, and what are the specific outcome goals? Although the program name mentions “children,” it could also be “community development” at the same time. These were some of the issues raised by staff in the office designated to oversee the program, who felt that it would be difficult to launch the program on their own.

Table 11-6: Tomiya City's major CFCI activities (January 2017–February 2021)

Date	Initiative
January 2017	Participation in the Japan Committee for UNICEF (JCU)'s CFCI Working Group Cities Initiative Working Group (later renamed the CFCI Committee)
May 2018	Tomiya Child-Friendly City Development Promotion Agency Internal Coordination Council established (meets 2 to 4 times a year)
October 2018	Commissioned by JCU as one of five municipalities to test UNICEF's Japan-style CFCI model
November 20, 2018 (World Children's Day)	Tomiya Child-Friendly City Development Declaration and Forum 196 participants, including assembly members, welfare volunteers, school and facility staff, and citizens
May 2019	Tomiya City Sports Declaration for Children Endorsed UNICEF's "Children's Rights in Sport Principles"
August 2019	CFCI training session for Tomiya City employees 56 participants, including the mayor and 2 other city officers, as well as managers of city departments and divisions
November 2019	UNICEF Japan-style CFCI Model Testing Interim Report Forum
November 20, 2019 (World Children's Day)	Tomiya <i>Wakuwaku</i> Children's Conference (later renamed the Children's Meeting)
October 2020	Testing of the UNICEF Japan-style CFCI Model completed
November 20, 2020 (World Children's Day)	Tomiya <i>Wakuwaku</i> Children's Meeting held
February 2021	UNICEF Japan-style CFCI Model Testing Completion Report Forum (held online)

To address the need for an all-agency structure, comprehensive and long-term deliberations, the participation of citizens and children, and a forum for discussing these issues, the decision was made to launch the “Tomiya Child-Friendly City Development Promotion Agency Internal Coordination Council” in May 2018. On October 29 of the same year, Tomiya City was commissioned to be one of five municipalities in Japan to test UNICEF’s Japan-style CFCI model (see Chapter 9).

The testing work was mainly guided by a checklist made up of nine components, which municipalities were expected to use to perform a self-evaluation of their “child-friendly city” initiatives. However, these components were a collection of global standards (“certification-based”), which were difficult to understand, and many of the phrases were not appropriate for local government. Accordingly, with the committee taking the lead, each participating municipality came up with ideas to develop a common understanding of the wording which was easy to understand. The evaluation sheet for the “Japan-style CFCI model” proposed by the JCU is composed of the original 9 components and an additional component, specific to the municipality in question.

3 Tomiya City's Activities (1)

On November 20, 2018 (World Children’s Day), Tomiya City issued the “Tomiya Child-Friendly City Development Declaration,” which consisted of the pillars of the right to life, the right to grow up, the right to be protected, and the right to participate, as set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The intention was for all of the city’s agencies to work toward a “child-friendly city.”

I feel that for the mayor to have made the declaration in front of citizens was very effective in building awareness throughout the city’s agencies, increasing staff motivation, and promoting the participation of residents and children. Furthermore, when promoting child-related projects and child participation, it is essential to present them in a manner that is easy for children to understand. This, in turn, builds understanding and trust in the city government in ways that are easy for citizens to understand and leads to self-governance with collaboration between the government and residents. The participation of children also helps children develop an attachment to their city. The projects that Tomiya City has been engaged in since the declaration are unique in that they were undertaken not only by departments related to children, but across the entire city government.

Table 11-7: Item 10 of the UNICEF Japan-style CFCI model and checklist (Tomiya City version)

10. Implement initiatives based on the five pillars of the “Tomiya Child-Friendly City Development Declaration”	
Japan-style CFCI model checklist	
1	Are initiatives being carried out to ensure that children are nurtured with care and grow up healthy?
2	Are initiatives being carried out to ensure that children can live safely and securely?
3	Are initiatives being carried out to enable children to interact with their friends and have fun playing and learning?
4	Are initiatives being carried out so children have a role within the scope of the social bonds that exist in the local community and so that they can participate actively?
5	Are initiatives being carried out which listen to children’s opinions and apply them to community development?

Tomiya City set the tenth item of the checklist as an evaluation based on the five pillars of the “Tomiya Child-Friendly City Development Declaration” (Table 11-7), which is being carried out alongside the CFCI model municipality program. This is because Tomiya’s goal of becoming a “child-friendly city” involves having children actively participate in community activities and harnessing their abilities and voices for community development. An emphasis was placed on communicating Tomiya City’s self-evaluation to citizens, including children, in a way which could be easily understood.

4 Tomiya City’s Activities (2)

Tomiya City has three main activities to promote “child-friendly city development.” The first is to hold a series of discussions at the “Tomiya Child-Friendly City Development Promotion Agency Internal Coordination Council,” which aims to share the citywide assessment, confer on the current situation and issues facing Tomiya, and bring the city closer to its goal of being “child-friendly.”

Promoting “child-friendly city development” throughout the city requires more than just awareness-raising and hard work on the part of the offices directly involved with children. This alone will not lead to a city that is truly “child friendly.” Rather, making everyone think about children, no matter whether they are directly or indirectly involved, will provide a shortcut to this goal. There remains a lot of work to do for the city to raise awareness on the part of individual employees. However, with the completion of testing for the JCU and the establishment of Tomiya City’s status as a CFCI Practice Municipality in April 2021, I feel that the groundwork has been laid.

The second activity is to hold “*Wakuwaku* Children’s Meetings,” which represent a concrete example of one of the four principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: “the ability to express opinions and participate.” Regarding the opinions expressed by the children in the discussions, we try not only to listen to their opinions but also to reflect their opinions in local administration, by making immediate improvements where possible, and keeping them informed of the status of issues that cannot be resolved right away.

At the “*Wakuwaku* Children’s Meeting” held in 2020, which had the theme of “Our Vision for the Future of Tomiya,” there were many opinions not only about everyday matters, but also about the SDGs and COVID-19, and other opinions on the city government, suggesting that the children had deepened their understanding of these issues before presenting them to the city government. This reaffirmed the importance of listening to children’s voices. The “*Wakuwaku* Children’s Meeting” was held again in FY2021, with the theme “Thinking about the

Figure 11-4: Narita Marche’s “Obento Biraki”



Future of Tomiya.” We would like to continue this style of direct exchange of opinions between the mayor and 16 fifth- and sixth-grade students from 8 elementary schools in the city.

The third activity is to broaden the range of efforts undertaken by residents. The organization Narita Marche,

❖ **Figure 11-5: A “Hand-me-down Party” held by Narita Marche**



which has endorsed Tomiya’s “Child-Friendly City Development Declaration,” was established in the city’s Narita district and has now been running for more than 10 years. The initial motivation for founding the group was to create a warm community where people could once again experience the reassuring sense of kinship that they felt when encouraging each other in the aftermath of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake.

Narita Marche has hosted a variety of events, including independent movie screenings for parents, “*Makanai-tsu-ki Terakoya* (traditional temple school with lunch)” which provides a meal and a place for children to spend time outside school, “*Nagashi Somen*” parties, where participants enjoy eating noodles flowing down a bamboo chute, “*Obento Biraki*” where the staff prepare side dishes and let the children pack their own lunches, “*Omusubi no Kai*” where people from all generations gather to take a break together, and “Hand-me-Down Parties,” which provides second-hand school uniforms and gym clothes and is a great help to the many people in the area raising children (Figure 11-4, Figure 11-5).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic that broke out in 2020, there was a time when it was not possible to hold any events involving eating or drinking, forcing them to

temporarily suspend activities. However, when schools were closed, they worried about whether the children were eating lunch properly and whether they were all right staying at home all day. Consequently, the group handed out lunchboxes so that they could also see the children’s faces and chat a little. It seems to me that this initiative went beyond simply handing out lunchboxes, serving also to convey the thoughts and good wishes of the staff. We will continue to collaborate with “Narita Marche” to make a “child-friendly city” a reality.

Other community activities include the PTA’s “Community Disaster Prevention Activities for Junior High School Students,” in which the students take part in disaster drills. The students enthusiastically performed their roles, such as calling on residents and helping with food distribution, happy that they could look after people in the community who normally look after them. Meanwhile, on “Baby School Day,” when mothers and their babies attend elementary schools in the city, sixth-grade elementary school students look back on their own childhood through the relationship between mothers and babies as a “life lesson.” Participating mothers are reminded of the importance of their babies’ presence and their love for their children, and gain a sense of fulfillment from raising children in the community.

Tomiya has also endorsed UNICEF’s “Children’s Rights in Sport Principles.” This involves conducting child-friendly city development from a number of angles. For example, the “Declaration of Sports for Children,” signed by the managers and coaches of 23 sports teams, was adopted at the inauguration ceremony of the Junior Sports Club Association, the first declaration like this by a local government. This Declaration of Sports for Children was also introduced at the CFCI Summit in Cologne in October 2019.

From April 2021, Tomiya City has been promoting the Japanese version of CFCI as a municipality that has already implemented CFCI. By ensuring safety and security in everyday life and enhancing systems to support child-raising activities, Tomiya is working to be a city where people want to keep living. This has been done by adding the goal of “creating a child-friendly city” to the Tomiya City Five-Year Comprehensive Plan (2021-2025) from FY2021, and by incorporating new perspectives into municipal government management.

For example, to emphasize the dignity of children, one activity is to give cards with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Tomiya Child-Friendly City Development Declaration, written in simple words, with the maternal and child health handbook which is issued to mothers and fathers when they find out they are expecting a baby. Some of these activities can be undertaken without establishing new departments to oversee them and without committing special budgets or large numbers of personnel. I believe that resolving issues as we become aware of them, one step at a time, will foster awareness about them.

It is my hope that we can spread Tomiya Child-Friendly City Development throughout the city by keeping our activities going, addressing issues that can be resolved right away, and having the Tomiya Child-Friendly City Development Promotion Agency Internal Coordination Council examine and evaluate those that require a long-term perspective. By implementing UNICEF’s Japan-style CFCI program, we aim to spread the concept of “child-friendly cities” to all citizens in an easy-to-understand way, build understanding and trust in the city government, and make the city sustainable over the long term, becoming a city that is friendly to everyone and where no one is left behind.

Written by Junko Inomata

11-3 SDGs from Children’s Eyes: The Power of “Play (Asobi)” as Learned from Actual Practices in Disaster Areas

1 Lessons from the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake

Someone shouted, “Let’s go!” Seven junior high school students and elementary school students formed a scrum on a table made of scrap wood gathered from the rubble. The shaking of the scrum gradually intensified, “Level 1, Level 2...” Then “Level 5, 6...7!” With a shout, the shaking reached a climax, and the legs of the table snapped off at the base, collapsing with a crack. The children cheered and jumped to the next table.

On January 17, 1995, a major earthquake centered on Awaji Island struck the city of Kobe. On the 25th, I arrived in Kobe with a small minivan packed with equipment that would be useful for building a children’s playground. Nagata Ward, where the playground was established, was crammed with small wooden houses, many of which had collapsed, and the ward had the largest area destroyed by fire in the city. Houses had collapsed like dominoes; the roofs of two-story buildings crushed to waist height. There may have been people still under them. The thick H-shaped steel beams that probably once supported the shopping arcade were twisted like candy, and the area was burned to the ground as far as the eye could see, just like in photographs of the hypocenter of the atomic bomb.

Children care for their psychological wounds through play. As a long-time operator of an adventure playground (play park) in Setagaya, Tokyo, I have seen countless such children in my daily life. However, is this still effective in the face of such destruction? In 1995, society paid little attention to children’s mental health care. Even amid the emergency, in the freezing weather, with no food or a place to sleep, we played happily with the children. Yet we came under harsh criticism, which served to further heighten our anxiety. It was here that the scene I described at the beginning of this article unfolded.

Even for me, who had not lived through the disaster, it was shocking to see. Moreover, it was taking place in an evacuation center set up in a park, surrounded by people

who had lost not only their homes and possessions, but also relatives and loved ones. Though it annoyed the adults, I realized that children were tending to their own mental health through play. Gradually increasing the shaking, they collapsed the table at “Level 7.” By recreating the earthquake, which even adults had not been able to withstand, they were attempting to control it and make sense of things once more. I was convinced that these games, which kept happening despite angry scolding from the adults, were a sign of self-care.

2 Establishing a Playground in Kesenuma

“Do you know how bored we were before the playground was built?” These were the first words spoken by a child who flew home from elementary school on the day that “Kesenuma *Asobiba*” opened (*Asobiba* means “play area” and is also a pun on “beaver”). The playground had been established in Motoyoshi, part of Kesenuma City in Miyagi Prefecture, on April 26, 2011, in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake. It began as a project by the Japan Adventure Playground Creation Association, an intermediary support group that promotes adventure playgrounds throughout Japan, to support areas affected by the disaster. The next day, the wife of the chairman of the District Promotion Association, who had made a great effort to open the playground, said, “I now understand how much the children had to endure at the shelters.” With a big smile on her face, she added, “Now that we have a playground, the children have got their wild side back.” I then remembered a handmade newspaper posted in the middle of the wall of the community center that read, “Children are the treasure of the community.” More than 100 people had evacuated to this community center.

The area affected by the earthquake and tsunami covered several thousand kilometers of coastline. If inland areas were also included, the size of the affected area would be unimaginably vast. Although we knew that mental health care for children was important, we had

❖ Figure 11-6: *Asobiba* flat area



no idea how to narrow down the areas to focus on. We therefore took the approach of selecting a location where we would reach every child in the local area, even if that area was small. The area of Motoyoshi that we chose had a kindergarten, elementary school, and junior high school on the same site. We thought that if we could build a playground nearby, we could cover all the children in the area. The school complex was on high ground, 30 meters above sea level and 500 meters from the coast, but the tsunami had still engulfed the schoolyard and some of the school buildings, dragging all the houses on the seaward side of the school into the sea. The playground had to be on even higher ground than that — an absolute requirement for residents’ peace of mind.

“In Sanriku, each valley has a different culture from the next.” This is what my contacts from the area all said when they learned that I was going to help start up a playground. However, what this meant was that the local culture was still alive. In communities like these, schools often play a central role in matters involving children. Conversely, if the school was wary, it might have become difficult to organize any activities involving local children. Therefore, to set up the playground, we first visited the school to ask for their understanding. The principal then introduced us to the District Promotion Association chairman and his wife, whom I mentioned previously.

The chairman looked for a place that could be used as a playground and rented it from the landowner. It was a hilly area, covered with thickets of bamboo so dense that not even children could squeeze in. We cleared this area and opened it up to the neighboring fallow fields. First, we used the slope to build a long slide, which was made

out of scrap wood we had collected. I thought this was an essential piece of equipment to use play to recreate a tsunami rushing up and engulfing everything in its path. Beginning with the first child whose words I noted above, elementary school students started to come, one after another. Golden Week (a week in April to May containing multiple national holidays) began immediately after the opening ceremony, and the principal of the elementary school reported that 90% of the school’s students had been to *Asobiba* by the time the holidays ended.

❖ Figure 11-7: *Asobiba* hill area and slide



❖ 3 Insights from Kesenuma *Asobiba*

After opening the playground, I noticed two major things.

The first is how mental turmoil can be expressed. From my experience in the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, I had expected the children to speak and act wildly after the disaster, but what emerged was completely different from what I had imagined. In Kobe, the children’s agitation came in the form of unresolved anger and sadness that they unleashed on one another directly, involving plenty

of rough words and behavior, something that was easy to understand. In Kesennuma, meanwhile, it is hard to describe the way the children seemed to sting each other, rubbing salt in each other's wounds. It was unbearable to watch, as though the very foundation of communication had broken down. I felt that this was not only a result of the mental distress brought about by the disaster.

The other thing I noticed was their physical condition. Running around the bumpy fallow fields, their upper bodies would sway from side to side. This happened even on level ground, and it was even more pronounced when running on the slopes that had been cut into the soil. When they ran down a slope, their upper body was left behind, or they flopped forward, as though they could fall over and hurt themselves at any time. There was also a rope swing, formed from a natural vine hanging from the seven-meter-high branch of a large tree. By grabbing the rope and kicking off toward the bottom of the hill, it was possible to reach about four meters off the ground. We had left it there when clearing the area, thinking it would be something exciting for the children to play with. Of course, the children's eyes lit up and many had a go, but to my surprise, they could not keep their arms in front of their chest when holding the vine. They would run down the slope as it were, still gripping the vine above their heads. Unable to run on bumpy ground, and unable to hold their bodies in place while swinging, it seemed that there was a fundamental problem with their physical abilities.

This was a problem common to most children, and one that I found quite shocking. It was clear that, regardless of the disaster, these children had not been playing outside. Despite the area being famous for its coast and ocean, backing onto forests and mountains, they had never had the chance to play there with their friends.

4 Play Car, Go!

The area affected by the disaster was frighteningly vast. To cover this area, we decided to use a "Play Car," a small minivan loaded with play equipment and materials. Due to the nuclear power plant explosion, Fukushima Prefecture was the least tended to of the disaster areas. With the support of corporate sponsors, we began running a Play Car around Fukushima Prefecture, opening one-day

visiting playgrounds.

The first of these cars was named "*Asobocar*" (which means "let's play" car). The most important consideration in the process of setting it up was the design. Disaster areas can often seem like a monotone world. The presence of a car with a pop-inspired design in primary colors was sure to brighten up the surroundings and delight the children, but what concerned me was how adults would perceive it. Once *Asobocar* started running, however, it turned out that I needn't have worried. Children's eyes would light up at the mere sight of the car, and when it passed by, they would turn around, point, and wave. Just the smiles on the children's faces must have brought cheer to many adults, and so *Asobocar* was very popular with them too.

The play kits inside also featured bright, vibrant designs in primary and pastel colors. These included an air hockey table, spinning tops, a wagon filled with tools, building blocks, a ring toss, a blackboard for scribbling on, a charcoal stove, ladles, pots, as well as wood, bamboo, nails, and glue for crafts. There were also ropes and sheets of fabric to make improvised playground equipment using trees, fences, or anything else at hand. Of course, the Play Car itself also functioned as a piece of play equipment. Even just spreading a few objects would transform the site into somewhere else entirely.

A toddler and an elementary school student said they'd never had so much fun before. A mother said through tears that it was the first time that her child had been able to leave her side since the disaster. A father murmured how he'd been wrong before, and that this was the kind of play he wanted to see. A grandmother told us happily

❖ Figure 11-8: *Asobocar*



that this was the first time after the disaster that she had seen her grandchild this excited. While I was heartened by these words, I was also painfully aware of how dire the situation must be for something this modest to make the children so happy.

The Play Car business could only be viable if the people hosting it were locals. This was to avoid, as much as possible, a situation where children could only play when a Play Car was there. The main goal was to have local people experience the program together, to convey the importance of playing together, and to increase the number of adults in various communities who could support children’s play without the use of a Play Car.

This activity was well received and caught the attention of the Reconstruction Agency and the Japan Committee for UNICEF, leading to the addition of Play Cars No. 2 and No. 3, “*Asobu-bu*” and “*Asobitaiya*.” The area covered by the Play Cars was then expanded to include Miyagi and Iwate, covering the three prefectures most heavily affected by the disaster.

5 Playworkers

Playgrounds have “playworkers” (play leaders) whose job is to create an environment that draws out each child’s desire to try things and have fun. In Europe, it has long been a respectable profession, but in Japan, the first playworkers were introduced in 1979, when Hanegi Play Park, a permanent adventure playground, was established in Setagaya Ward to commemorate the International Year of the Child (I was one of those appointed). Playworkers’ skills have a direct effect on the quality of the play environment. Having a playworker was a prerequisite for being able to run *Asobocar*, the first Play Car.

A major challenge in increasing the number of Play Cars was to train playworkers with these abilities. Intensive training was conducted over four nights and five days, with a play park in Setagaya used as a training site. The playworker who ran *Asobocar* was then put in charge of the Play Car training. Subsequently, the three playworkers established their own “playworkers” organization to promote the creation of play environments for children, mainly in the Tohoku region.

6 Revitalizing Children

Japan’s “Children’s Day” holiday came ten days after the opening of *Asobiba*. Starting in May, we talked with the children about all sorts of things to make this day as much fun as possible. Several children wanted to sing the song “*Niji*” (“Rainbow”; lyrics by Toshihiko Shinzawa, music by Hiroataka Nakagawa), so they started practicing that morning. In the evening, sitting on the raised bank of the playground, four children began to sing toward the ocean. When I looked over, I saw that the group had grown to seven and was taken aback, for among them was a child who had barely spoken since the disaster. That child, who had lost close relatives, was loudly singing “*Niji*” with everyone else.

One day, after the May holidays, I heard a voice say “Wow!” and went over to see what was happening. There, I saw a girl on the rope swing. She kicked off the ground as hard as she could and flew toward the sky. Holding her arms tightly in front of her chest, she swung through the air over and over again. She became the first to tame the swing, and by the end of the day, she had learned how to go right around the tree. Her body had responded to her determination, and she had acquired the strength to make it possible.

By the end of May, there were virtually no more children who swayed from side to side as they ran through the fallow fields. There was no longer any need to worry when they ran down the slope, and by the end of the summer holiday, they were all leaping about like monkeys.

Around the beginning of June, a group came to conduct a survey to support NPOs working in the disaster area.

Figure 11-9: Children playing



After spending some time at *Asobiba*, they said that it was the first time they had seen such a cheerful place in the affected areas. These words, coming from people who had observed many different places, came as the highest praise.

As I had expected, tsunami games showed up often in the children's play for a time. At one point, a group of boys started playing, and a little girl nearby shouted "Stop!" in a small voice. The boys said sorry and started another game. In the winter of that year, building secret bases became popular. Once, a child stepped through the floor of one and cried out, and a voice from somewhere said, "Are you okay?" The thought came to me that they were playing together, sharing a time and place, even though they were playing completely different games. I experienced firsthand how the relationships between them, which had been so antagonistic at the start, had gradually transformed into warm and amicable ones.

7 The Value of Play

Play that begins with the desire to try something is a world where the child's inner life comes to the surface. As such, it fosters a sense of the self as a living thing. For children, "play" means building "my world," an essential experience for creating their identity. "Wanting to try" is also a kind of desire, and the ability to take care of oneself is deeply linked to this "will to live."

This does not only apply to children. One grandmother who comes here says that hearing children's laughter cheers her up, and a mother with a small child says she is happy and relieved to see her child being cared for by everyone. If it makes the children happy, local adults are willing to offer their help. The community, with the children at the center, comes alive.

A community built around children becomes their "hometown," something that will support them throughout their lives. One cannot talk about the SDGs and children without mentioning the value of "play."

To this day, *Asobiba* remains a beloved, irreplaceable community playground, led by the wife of the District Promotion Association chairman, where all generations come together to interact.

Written by Hideaki Amano