



18/12/2012 vol4

**** Letters from Tohoku: Connecting you and the mothers in Tohoku ****
~ Baby Smile Ishinomaki; run by mothers for mothers and the future of the community ~



Hello everyone, we hope that this newsletter finds you well.

Were you all OK from the earthquake and the tsunami on 7th of December? It really is difficult to keep calm with the real event, even if we have all been attending the emergency evacuation training with the fresh memory of 3.11.

Some of you must have had real flash backs of the 3.11, triggered by this earthquake... hope you have been able to manage the painful memories somehow.

On the 8th of November, an article written by J' espère representative Shoko So was published in the "Watashi no Shiten" (my point of view) section of Asahi News Paper. You can look at a copy of the full article on the J' espère HP but as we would really like to share it with you, we have also put the full article in this newsletter. Also, in the "From the disaster area..." section, we have a report from Baby Smile Ishinomaki representative Yumi Arai - who has also written a column in Asahi News Paper. Ms Arai is not a midwife but a full time mother of two boys. She has worked for local mothers as she felt a strong necessity to support them.

It concerns the present and future of the disaster area, so please do take your time to read to the end.



◆ What we have accomplished so far...



<Number of mothers who received aid>

November : 359 mothers (Total: 2119 mothers)

< Aid coverage>

Iwate pref. (Ofunato, Rikuzentakata, Kamaishi, Otsuchi, Tono)

Miyagi pref. (Ishinomaki, Kisenuma, Watari, Natori)

Fukushima (Iwaki, Soma)

<Aid content>

Parental consultation/ Tea and chat time/ Baby massage/Baby exercise/Mum' s refresh exercise/ Mum&Baby' s exercise/Visiting temporary housing



◆Asahi News Paper " Watashi no Shiten" (published 8th November 2012)
Written by Shoko So (Director of Matsugaoka Midwifery Clinic, J' espère representative)
http://tohokumama.org/images/main/20121108_asahi.pdf



Below is the whole article published in the Asahi News Paper column " Watashi no Shiten" (My point of view). Last year, the Tokyo Midwives Association, where I was holding a position of vice president, conducted the "Tokyo Satogaeri Project" (Satogaeri means to go back to the home of one' s parents). In this project, the pregnant

women and the postnatal women living in the disaster area were accepted in the midwifery clinics in Tokyo. The aim of this project was for the pregnant women and mothers who wished to be evacuated to Tokyo to be able to spend their late pregnancy period and the early postnatal period in the safety and relaxed atmosphere of the clinics, as if they have gone back to their parents' home. In total, 79 women have benefited from our project of which 23 of them gave birth in Tokyo. The project also provided telephone consultation for the pregnant women and new mothers, as well as working together with the local midwives in order to provide aid. The necessary funds were covered by donations from individuals and a grant from Nippon Foundation.

The reality of the disaster area for the pregnant women and new mothers was much more serious than we had imagined. Even breastfeeding was a difficulty in evacuation centres where there is no privacy. There were mothers who were living in a car or first floor of a broken house, as they felt uneasy about bothering others with their crying baby. There are also mothers who kept on moving between the houses of distant relatives, as they feared the effect of radiation on their baby.



Aid for the pregnant women and new mothers tend to be forgotten in the disaster area as they can move and act almost the same as others. No one is really aware that they need special care. It is worrying to know how little they understand about birth. When we asked the person in charge of the evacuation centre about support provided to the pregnant women, the response was "We will take her to the hospital by helicopter if the contraction starts". However, the necessity of the support is not limited solely to times of labour.

Stress during the pregnancy will often lead to a premature birth and/or complications at birth, which means that it is likely to affect the health of the baby. After the labour, if the mother is not in a place where she can feel safe, she will find it difficult to nurture her baby properly.

To have to bring up children, living in tightly built temporal housing without enough soundproofing is far from ideal. It is especially, too much of a burden for the mother to return to such place straight after the birth. With this in mind, we, together with Fukushima Midwives Association managed to set up a postnatal care home called "Ohisama" (means the sun) in Aizuwakamatsu city in July last year.

Furthermore, this year, we formed the General Community Corporation J' espère in order to continue the aid in the disaster area with the local communities. We also started the "Tohoku Kosodate Project" (Tohoku Parenting Project). In Ofunato city and Rikuzentakata city in Iwate pref., the local midwives volunteered to start a gathering space for the pregnant women and the mothers called "Kosodate ship", which is held twice a month. In Ishinomaki city, Miyagi pref., a full time mother has started a similar activity called "Baby Smile Ishinomaki" in order to provide a space for parental support and places where the mothers and the children can meet and spend time with one another.

We have been receiving aids from companies such as SEIYU as well as donations from individuals but money alone does not lead to success in parenting aid projects. I believe that the most important part is the thoughtfulness towards pregnant women, mothers and babies coming from each individual in the community.

Aid activity towards pregnant women and mothers leads to the recovery of society and a nurturing of the next generation. Therefore it is one of the most important aspect that we all need to consider seriously.



◆From the disaster area... (By NPO Baby Smile Ishinomaki, Ishinomaki city, Miyagi pref.)
<http://www.forbabysmile.com/>



NPO Baby Smile Ishinomaki is an organisation lead by a full time mother to provide workshops and events for the local pregnant women and mothers with children of pre-schooling age.

The workshops are very busy and popular. They are held about 10 to 15 times a month and in total, around 200 people attend every month. However, nearly two years have passed since the disaster and the mothers who are running the workshops are feeling their limits.



The representative, Yumi Arai is a mother of two boys and has been running these workshops without any support, working non-stop for the mothers of Ishinomaki ever since the disaster.

However, even at this stage, they are unable to get formal support from the local government or a council and they are running short of funds. She would really like to continue the work but cannot see a secure future for the work without governmental back up... Ms Araki is truly asking for a helping hand right now.

◆◆Being supported by everyone' s happy faces

On a cold day of December last year, despite the rain, ten mothers with babies were in Hebita Coop Meeting room. This day was a day for mother and child exercises. Mothers stretched their stiff bodies while holding their baby or keeping a close eye on them. Next, they gave their baby a massage and there were some babies who fell asleep in a complete state of relaxation. On another day, we have held an "Allergy gathering" in the city' s community centre. Eight families who have children who are allergic to things like eggs and house dust mites gathered together in this meeting in order to discuss about the availability of school meals for children with allergies in Ishinomaki city. We have all learned that compared to the surrounding cities, our city is rather behind on this aspect and we all agreed that we would like to provide food that is safe for children with allergies in Ishinomaki city also.

Other than the above, we hold events such as Baby Sign, Exercise, Hand Massage and Make up, and other seasonal events like Christmas parties in the city' s community centres in order to provide a safe and relaxing gathering space and events for families to attend. After the disaster, there were many mothers who did not want to go out and chose to stay at home as they felt so depressed.



But as

children need to be physical and involve movement in their play many started to go out as they did not want to their children to be denied of play because of them.

" My emotions were really lightened and felt happier when I saw my child play with joy. Thank you so much for creating such a place for us" This was one example of the feedback I have received. Comments such as these support me to carry on this work.

◆◆A friend who I lost in Tsunami, and the resentment that forced me.

Before the disaster, I was working at a local parenting group that has been going on for the last eight years.

However, my friend, who was a leader of this group, was taken away by the Tsunami. The rest of the staff also moved away from here, so we all got separated.

For me, as a mother, this group was a place where I exchanged information, where my children could meet and play with other children and it was my connection to the society, outside my family unit. I was truly supported in every way from this group.

I felt, “ I really want to recreate the precious space for parents and children that I have created with my friends”

So two months after the disaster, in May 2011, I was pregnant with my second boy (8 months pregnant) but still, I felt that I could do it, so started it all.

I feel that that motive was strongly driven by the resentment coming from losing my friend in tsunami. With my husband’ s support, I started alone as a voluntary organisation.

◇◆Feeling of loss returns as I slow down

Right now, compared to the situation just after the disaster, there is nothing that we need urgently, or have to do as in an emergency situation.

However, even after time has passed, the parenting in the temporary housing continues. Also there are no facilities or parks where you can allow your children to play freely. I do not see any improvement in the environment for parenting.

After the disaster, all the free spaces were taken up by temporary housing and we have much less parks than we had before.

People who had a huge amount of damage from the disaster have been living in desperation and great hardship in order to re-build their lives again. There have been a lot of paper work. Especially if you have children, processing all that work while looking after children has been a phenomenal amount of hardship.



Everybody has been lost in this hardship, but now that time has passed people are beginning to slow down a little and the sense of loss is coming back. “I suddenly feel why am I here, why am I living here...? “

For the mothers who are living in the temporary housing, many of them cannot see where they would be moving to. They carry this as a vague worry that hangs on them as a permanent cloud, which means they can never relax completely. Some of them are really weakened emotionally and mentally and finding the parenting itself a real burden as this constant worry together with the exhaustion that comes with parenting is just too much.

Everyone is really making a real effort. During fun times like our events, they all have smiles on them but of course when we try to talk about the disaster, there is so much suffering that comes out with the tears. I feel that everyone has rather forcefully bottled up their painful feelings.

Bringing up children takes up a lot of physical and emotional energy of the mother, even in normal circumstances. But these mothers carry a huge worry on top of that so I strongly feel the necessity to keep an eye on one another so that the mothers will not be driven into isolation or abuse.

◇◆Our motivation alone is not enough.

Nearly two years have passed since the disaster, however our heart has not progressed since. There are so many people who are living with the painful emotions without the prospect of these feelings being healed.

The pain we each carry is very individual, hence it is impossible to know what words that are uttered may end

up hurting someone in some way. Still, especially because we learnt how very precious the connection between the people are through the disaster, we all have a strong wish for a connection with the others.

To give birth, to bring a child up and to protect it.

The feeling of connection in our lives is so important. We understand and know that most, hence we are motivated and we want our work to have deeper roots in our lives.

On the other hand, all of us are full-time mothers so we have more than enough on our plate just to run the workshops and events. Negotiation of space for the workshops, fundraising, asking for support etc are the things we would all love to do but in reality we don't have the time.

We also feel frustrated about the fact that our government manages to neglect such an important issue. In Ishinomaki, the recovery of the buildings and the infrastructure is slow. This means that formal support towards an organisation like ours is beyond the scope of their imagination.

We understand that grants are open to all applications. However, when the organisation is thoroughly run by full time mothers, the process of application and delivering reports after it etc are all too much burden on me as a representative.

I feel, " I wish there are more support from the local community..."

" I wish the government or the council provided us a space to use..."

I think it is essential for everyone in the community to feel and to have awareness that a community must always include a space like our workshop.

We have been working with our motives alone as a driving force for the last two years. Our hope has been to re-build a community for parenting through having a personal connection with every member of the community. This has been our only hope and the drive to continue our work. However we need more than our motives to make it happen.



Please give us your support. We need your generous helping hand in order to continue our work.

Thank you very much for reading till the end.

Lastly,

We have made a little booklet, filled with messages that arose during the powerful moment when we so wanted to protect lives. It is called " Dear Children - messages from mothers- " so that our feelings will not be forgotten in the future.

This booklet is for sale, we are asking for donations from 1000 yen per booklet, we would be very happy if you could read it.

※Please order your booklet though our website;

<http://www.forbabysmile.com/>



◆ Please help us!



Tohoku Kosodate Project run by J' espère is supporting the local midwives' activity giving aid to the mothers in the disaster area.

Only through your warm support and donation, are we able to continue our work. All the support that you have very kindly given to us is the source of our work force.

So please do help us to spread the word about our work and do share our site with your friends, families and everyone else so that we can continue to give aid to the mothers in the disaster area.

We also welcome your messages and supporting comments about our work so please do visit our site and leave some words for the mothers, midwives and our staff.

Thank you very much.

<http://tohokumama.org/donation.html>



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This is a monthly publication. We receive a monthly report from the local midwives working in the area and so we are able to tell you the most recent stories from the disaster areas on the issue of living and parenting. Please do have a read and look out for our future publications also!

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