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Raising this child

Voices of kindred foster parents in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake



Graduate School of Education, Tohoku University
Support Office for Children in the
Aftermath of the 2011 Japan Earthquake

"S-Chil"



This booklet was printed using waterless printing and FIM screening.



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Introduction

The number of children who lost both of their parents in the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011 (so-called earthquake disaster orphans) totals 253 in the three disaster-affected prefectures (according to the survey conducted by municipalities in September 2014). The care of most of those children was assumed by other family members such as grandparents, uncles and/or aunts. These kindred foster parents, who had to unexpectedly take charge of these children, have been interacting with these children who are growing up day by day, while dealing with their own sorrow.

Since the earthquake disaster, the Support Office for Children in the Aftermath of the 2011 Japan Earthquake (S-Chil) of the Graduate School of Education, Tohoku University has regularly held a kindred foster parents' salon at various places in Miyagi Prefecture, with the Miyagi Nagomi-no-kai (the former Foster Parents Association) and child consultation centers in the prefecture, to offer an opportunity for conversation among kindred foster parents. Listening to their conversations, we have considered how best to convey to you the thoughts and emotions of those parents regarding their new parenting roles.

Fourteen families of kindred foster parents kindly responded to our request. During the period from October to November 2013, the counsellors from the S-Chil and I visited their houses to hear their stories. Then, we transcribed their conversations and classified them according to the contents. We wanted to express their animated speech specific to the Tohoku coastal region as it was, but we partially modified the expressions within the scope of not changing the contents so that many people can read and understand what is written. In this regard, we ask for your understanding.

In this booklet, the results of our hearing survey are summarized. We hope that not only the kindred foster parents who cooperated with us this time, but also the people around them, relatives who are not using the kindred foster parent system, people who support earthquake disaster posthumous children and orphans, or people who live far away and think about post-disaster Tohoku will read this booklet. The S-Chil ultimately hope that some day in the future the foster children themselves will read this booklet to understand the feelings of their foster parents who decided to "raise this child."

Finally, we sincerely pray for the souls of those who lost their lives in the Great East Japan Earthquake, and also pray for the good health of the kindred foster parents and sound development of the children.

Support Office for Children in the Aftermath of the 2011 Japan Earthquake,
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*This survey was conducted with approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Graduate School of Education, Tohoku University.

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About the kindred foster parent system

(Awareness of the foster parent system)



This survey was conducted on fourteen families of kindred foster parents (35% of all kindred foster parents in Miyagi Prefecture) who cooperated with us through their participation in the kindred foster parent salon, and the survey results are summarized in this booklet. At the time of the earthquake disaster, these foster parents were in their 50's to 70's, while children ranged from infants to high school students.

Regarding four families, the children lived with their foster parents prior to the earthquake. As for the other ten families, the children started living with their foster parents after the earthquake, and the frequency of meeting each other before the earthquake varied widely from two or three times a week to two or three times a year.

Two families knew about the kindred foster parent system, nine didn't know about it, and three knew about the system by name only. Therefore, most of them didn't know about the details of the foster parent system. They came to know about the kindred foster parent system through the officers of municipalities, child consultation centers, schools, etc. after the earthquake disaster.

Foster care

Foster care provides a nurturing family environment of affection and understanding for children who are difficult or cannot be raised in their own homes for whatever reason. It is a significant system in which children are raised in a caring and loving relationship with certain adults through family life, which is very important to the sound growth of children. (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2011)

There are four types of foster parents: (1) nurturing foster parents, (2) specialized foster parents, (3) adoptive parents, and (4) kindred foster parents. Since the Great East Japan Earthquake, many families and relatives have become kindred foster parents and nurturing foster parents. Kindred foster parents are provided with living expenses from public funds for social nursing care, and in principle their medical expenses are free of charge.

Numbers of posthumous children and orphans from the earthquake disaster

	Earthquake disaster orphans	Earthquake disaster posthumous children
Iwate	94	489
Miyagi	135	923
Fukushima	24	162
Total	253	1574

(By the hearing survey from the municipalities, September 2014)

Number of earthquake disaster orphans in foster care

Caregivers	Preschool children	Elementary school children	Junior high school students	High school students and older	Total
Kindred	9	53	29	43	134
Nursing home	0	0	1	0	1
Total	9	53	30	43	135

(Miyagi Prefecture, January 2013)

Sense of mission

I thought I was the only one who would be raising this child who is my only relative that has been left alone.

I lost my daughter. I thought my daughter was reincarnated as this child and decided I would bring her up as my own child.

My head was full of thoughts of my departed daughter, but I realized there was no one else that my grandchild could depend on but me and decided that I would live with my grandchild.

I myself have to be resolute, especially in child discipline. From the beginning, I said (to my grandchild), "I am your grandmother in our family register, but I am taking the place of your mother as I live with you."



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Their feelings on becoming kindred foster parents



Although the kindred foster parent was concerned about the future of the foster child and the feelings of his/her spouse who is not a blood relative of the child, he/she thought it was natural for him/her to take charge of the child and was aware that "I'm the only one who will raise the child." The existence of the child encouraged the foster parent, making him/her think "This child gives me motivation to live."

Kindred foster parent system

I was glad to know that there is such a system.

I think it is very good that there is such a system.

I feel secure because I can get back up when I am in trouble.

It is very helpful that they make home visits, listen to us and give advice.

At first, I didn't get the meaning of "kindred foster parent." Why is the term "foster parent" used? Even now I think that we are related by blood and in the same family.

A natural state of affairs

When my grandchild cried (when he/she learned that his/her mother had died), I said, patting him/her on the head, "You are not alone. This is where you were born. So, you can come here to live with us."

Since he/she was a little child, I used to take care of him/her, rocking him/her to sleep in my arms. So, I don't think being his/her foster parent is a big deal.

I thought it would be better for the child to come to my house than to be alone in an unfamiliar environment.

Anxieties and concerns

At first, I thought that the relationship between foster parent and foster child may cause some problems when the grandchild grows up and gets a job, for example. I hesitated to become a foster parent, and I rejected the idea at first. However, they said "There is nothing to worry about," and I felt relieved.

I didn't feel uncomfortable taking charge of the child because he/she is my sister's child, but I was worried about the feelings of my husband (who is not a blood relative of the child).

Thinking I have to make every effort to raise the child, I feel burdened. I would be lying if I said I didn't feel restricted.

Encouragement

Without my grandchild, I wouldn't be alive. My grandchild gives me motivation to live.

(I lost my daughter, but I can raise my surviving grandchild.) What a pleasure! I am just his/her grandmother but I am determined to raise this child. I have to pull myself together.