

Support for children/people with developmental disabilities during disasters

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Though I have long been working to support people with developmental disparities, I am ashamed to say that I have never imagined what their lives would be like in evacuation shelters in the event of a disaster. After the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995, the term “mental healthcare” has come into widespread use, and we should have been prepared in many ways. However, when the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake occurred, support for those with developmental disabilities was not yet established, with support instead being provided in a form of trial and error. As I visited evacuation shelters and temporary housing, I noticed several things. I think the thing that people suffered the most from during evacuation shelter life was perhaps “sensory hypersensitivity.” In our daily life, people use various methods to avoid or mitigate various stimuli. However, during evacuation shelter life, strong stimuli mercilessly invade the five senses and expose people to unpleasant sensations. Particularly for people with noise sensitivity, the noise that echoes in evacuation shelters was unpleasant, and I met children who spent the entire day covered in blankets. Food was also scarce, and the amount of rationed food was limited, so it must

have been very difficult for children with strong likes and dislikes because of sensitive tastes. I met children who went without food for several days, as though they were on a hunger strike. I think it was also difficult to adapt to the changing rules. People who were not great at communication often act, to an extent, according to a sort of a template in their relationships. Life in an evacuation shelter was something they had never experienced, and there was no template they had on hand to deal with the situation. In other words, they had to newly learn rules that are specific to evacuation shelter life. When such a chaotic situation continues, people begin to cling to the things around them that they can control in their search for emotional stability. They strongly try to protect their routines or check their belongings. People around them feel that they have become more particular, and I had many people consult me on how to deal with such situations. Miyagi Prefectural Ishinomaki Support School conducted a survey of the situation of the children enrolled at the school. The report stated that about three months after the disaster, only about 15% of the enrolled students were using regular evacuation shelters. One can easily

imagine that evacuation shelters were a very difficult environment for children with some kind of disability. Those with developmental disabilities are prone to anxiety in environments that differ from their usual ones, so we need to think about creating evacuation shelters where such people can feel a little more secure. Although there is still much room for debate, there have been proposals to designate local special-needs schools as welfare evacuation shelters for people with disabilities. I think that we need to prepare a system that accepts external support staff on a regular basis and create a base from which to support the evacuation life of people with disabilities in emergencies.

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