

Ana Lima

# Making Sense of the News— Children Respond to the Earth- quake and Tsunami in Japan

Children's exposure to television programming remains a critical and influential factor in their upbringing and education. Both parents and educators rely on the media to support them in censoring the information their children are exposed to and to provide programming which serves the educational needs of children. However, in a world where children are exposed to information from various media including TV, phones and computers, it becomes a lot harder to shield them from events of global significance and to control the content they are exposed to.

How can parents and educators best maintain a balance between protecting children, while helping them understand information in the news? Further, what is the role and responsibility of the media and TV programming in shaping children's perceptions of the world? Considering these questions, IBOPE Media, the Paulo Montenegro Institute and ComKids, a festival supported by the Prix Jeunesse Foundation in Germany, carried out research to better understand children's response to the 2011 earthquake in Japan and its impact on their opinions, health and wellbeing.

To assess how children felt when confronted with news of the tsunami and earthquake in Japan, 166 children, ages 5-14, from over eight countries including Germany and

Brazil were asked to use drawings to illustrate their response to the news in Japan. It was clear from the drawings that news of the tsunami was in the forefront of most children's minds given its widespread coverage by the media. The drawings also provided additional insight into the perceptions among children of different cultures and peoples, as well as pointing out differences in how girls and boys interpret information.

Noteworthy among the drawings done by Brazilian children were references to Japanese culture, its people and its history.

Japanese immigrants began arriving in Brazil at the start of the 20th century, and today São Paulo is home to the largest Japanese population outside of Japan, with a population close of 1.5 million.

The influence and heritage of Japanese culture in Brazil, was reflected in the drawings of many Brazilian children who included details such



Figure 1: Drawing by Nana, 7

as, eye and facial characteristics, and traditional clothes and hairstyles (see figure 1). When interviewed children also mentioned values they most closely associate with Japanese people, including being organized, hardworking, strong, and having an ability to rebuild quickly.

*In interviews children expressed their concern for the Japanese people:*

„I spoke to my parents, we agreed that the situation is deplorable . . . and know the Japanese people are strong and courageous“ (boy , 10 years old)

„I spoke to my great-grandmother, grandparents and people in my home when I first saw images of the tsunami and was concerned for my relatives there, but I was told that my relatives did not live in areas affected by the tsunami (girl, 11 years old)

The drawings also suggested differences in how girls and boys expressed their feelings. Drawings done by girls were more likely to include a human figure, often in an emotional state (see figure 2). Meanwhile boys tended to describe the damages caused to buildings, roads and especially cars (see figure 3). In most of the drawings, children also incorporated events and images from their own experiences and daily lives.

It was also clear from the drawings that media coverage has an effect on children’s education, and in shaping their discussions and concerns at

home and at school. When interviewed, 89% of children had heard of news of the Tsunami in Japan, however, only 49% and 51% of children reported discussing the events at home and at school, respectively. 88% of children also reported watching news of the event on TV, and as a result 59% feared the tsunami could have dangerous consequences for the world at large. When information from the news makes its way into the classroom teachers are often responsible for explaining these distressing events to children who are unlikely to make sense of the information or put into context.

The information and images children encounter through watching television, using computers and other forms of technology forces them to confront difficult images and events. When questioned only around 14% of children could explain in any detail what they knew of an earthquake and a tsunami, meanwhile even fewer had any knowledge of the dangers posed by nuclear power plants. Children’s minds remain more susceptible to events like the tsunami in Japan, which create lasting images and can be accompanied by feelings of fear, fragility and insecurity. As parents and educators it is important to understand the effect this information has on our children, as well as fulfill our responsibility to reassure and help them make sense of it all. ■

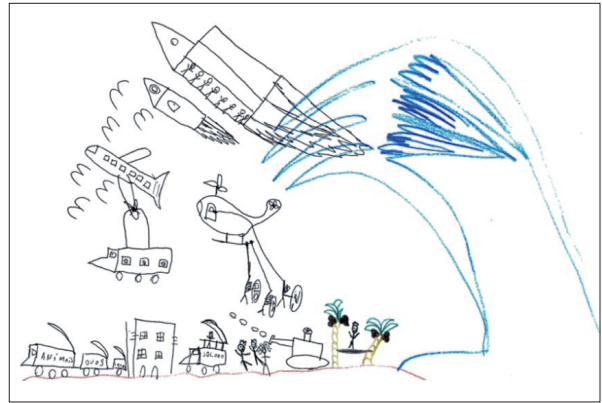


Figure 3: Drawing by João, 8

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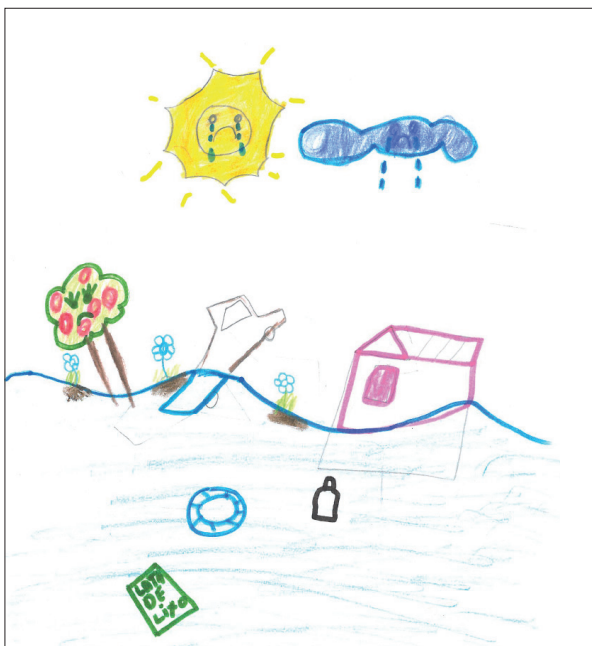


Figure 2: Drawing by Andreia, 9