

# A Lesson You Will Never Forget

There are very few countries that experience as many natural calamities as Japan does. From earthquakes to typhoons, volcanic eruptions to tsunamis, this far-east island country has always had to adapt its lifestyle to the threats of nature. From a very young age, kids learn about both manmade and natural disasters in school, but today, this experimentation becomes even more realistic at the Tachikawa Life Safety Learning Center. The Tokyo Fire Department here plays host to incredibly fun yet highly pedagogical facilities that can be enjoyed by both children and adults alike.

In August 2022, on a hot summer day, elementary school students Ryosuke (8), Yunao (9), and this writer visited the western Tokyo suburb of Tachikawa. There was a mini fire engine where the boys changed into fire-fighting outfits. Except for the size, the uniforms were authentic. The fabric was thick and heavy, and the suits were not particularly comfortable. However, the tactile experience of wearing the uniform invoked a visceral reaction as both the boys transformed into earnest fire-fighters, albeit really cute ones. The possible photo opportunity afforded here could provide mementoes that would invariably delight parents, grandparents, and of course, the kids too. More importantly, the photos

Both boys quickly took the initiative and showed responsibility beyond their years in the smoke room.



The intensity of the really strong earthquake simulation took the boys by surprise.

would serve as a powerful reminder of the vital lessons that were learned here.

Of the many disaster simulation experiences to be had here, we started in the earthquake simulator room. After a short warmup with a relatively mild tremor, we then had to brave a really strong quake! Now the pseudo cupboards made of soft materials were falling all over the place and the noise was stupendous. Of course, we recalled being taught of the crucial need to turn off the gas valve and to secure an escape route once the shaking had finished, but right then in the peak of the convulsions, and for the first time in our lives, the kids and I understood the importance of spreading your knees to keep good balance, while protecting our heads.

After enduring the massive earthquake simulation, we next went into the smoke room. The goal was to learn how to evacuate from a burning building without inhaling or being surrounded by smoke. All we had were small handkerchiefs to cover our mouths. Once we entered the maze-like space, corridors were dark, artificial smoke was dense, and even some door knobs were locked. As an adult, I was struggling to keep a low position. It was undoubtedly the two boys who lead the way, relentlessly looking for an exit. Wow! Emotions ran high when we finally touched home base; the kids seemed to be showing much higher interest and concentration levels in these situations than perhaps they

Everyone can have fun as they gain life-saving knowledge by experiencing disaster simulations.

by Florent Dabadie

would in a classroom or through a book.

We then went to the fire-fighting section, where we were told to extinguish images of fire projected onto a large screen using fire extinguishers that sprayed water. The extinguisher was heavy, but once we learned how to use it, it was simple and easy. We spent a lot of time trying VR simulations and fire extinguishing shooting games and finally left with a feeling of fulfilment, but with the urge to return. There was still so much more to experience and learn!

Usually some 270,000 people visit the Tachikawa facility and the two other learning centers in Tokyo annually. To date, the centers have welcomed visitors

from about 70 countries. Through learning how to act during disasters we are less prone to panic and mistakes. Whether you are a kid or an adult, the motto is “help yourself and help others.”

Thrilled by their half day at the special center operated by the Tokyo Fire Department, Ryosuke and Yunao got an official stamp, a couple of goodies, and above all, some indelible memories to share with their friends. The learning centers are great for all kids and adults, and some of the exhibits are in English, so many foreigners as well could benefit from the experience. The very serious subject of disasters is treated in a very clever and engaging manner.

The experience of transforming into a fireman is certainly a joy.

