

Chernobyl children given hope in Britain

How visits to the UK boost health of lives blighted by radiation – Oct. 2010

Joy in their faces, and bursting with energy, they appear not to have a care in the world. But this group of children running excitedly across a school playing field have all been blighted by one of the world's worst disasters.

And the reason they are so happy is because they have come to Britain on a trip which could save their lives.

The children are from Belarus, just miles from the Chernobyl nuclear reactor which spewed huge clouds of radioactive material over Europe when it exploded in 1986. The accident happened long before they were born, but it has left many with radiation in their bodies three times the safe level.

Many contract cancer and leukemia early in their lives. Many are unlikely to reach their teens. But there is hope for these children – thanks to the kindness of ordinary Britons.

Each year thousands arrive in the UK to stay with a foster family. They spend a month eating fresh food, playing outside, breathing clean air and receiving medical treatment.

And scientific tests show that when they return many are clear of radiation poisoning, with their immune systems boosted.

Doctors working in hospitals in Belarus say the trips add years to their lives. One report found: "For each child taken to the UK they are 'returned' two years of life."

The trips were launched by charity Chernobyl Children's Lifeline in the aftermath of the disaster. At first the aim was simply to give respite to the children – some left orphaned, many ravaged by illness. But charity workers began to notice that when it came time for them to go back, their health had dramatically improved.

Charity trustee Pauline Fitter said: "The children would arrive with grey, dull faces and rotting teeth – looking so frail and sick.

"When they left they were rosy-cheeked and full of life."

Tests showed that levels of the cancer-causing chemical caesium almost disappeared when the children returned from Britain. And levels would stay low for up to three years after the trips. So far more than 50,000 children aged 10 to 14 have been flown over, at a cost of £500 per child.

Small groups are accompanied by a teacher and put up by foster families across the country. The latest group – from Mogilev in eastern Belarus, 90 miles from Chernobyl – are staying in Surrey and London.

Days after arriving they enjoyed a day at the Haslemere Preparatory School in Surrey, where they played happily outside with other schoolchildren.

They have been to the seaside, been swimming and seen the sights of London, before watching Disney on Ice at the O2 Arena.

It is a far cry from their lives back home, where they are warned not to play outside for too long.

Speaking of her joy at being in Britain, 10-year-old Olla Petrovskaya, whose father died from lung cancer seven years ago, said: "It has been wonderful. Back home we are warned not to do things like swim in the river or play outside for too long. But here we can be free. I love it."

Her friend Roma Ragain, also 10, said: "I most enjoyed going to the beach and picking shells and I have loved staying with the family I am with."

The children's teacher Nina Viktorchik, 54, said: "I've seen dozens of the children I teach die from cancer after Chernobyl. And many suffer from appalling health problems.

"We're amazed when they return. They are full of energy and life. These trips and the kindness of Britain is giving my country and our children hope."

Name _____ Hour _____ Date _____

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2. What is Chernobyl?
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4. Why are the children in Britain?

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5. How do the children benefit from the trip to Britain?
6. Name two activities the children did while in London.
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