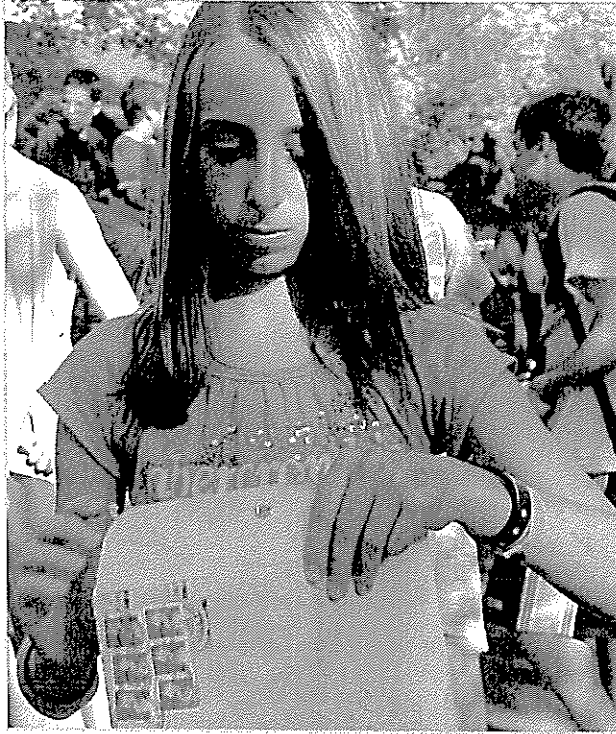


The Great News About Homesickness

Christopher A. Thurber, Ph.D.



That's right . . . there's great news about homesickness! For starters, you should know that:

- Homesickness (or "missing home") is normal. In study after study, researchers found that 95 percent of boys and girls who were spending at least two weeks at overnight camp felt some degree of homesickness. Children at day camp may also feel pangs of homesickness, but less frequently.
- Homesickness is typically mild. Nearly everyone misses something about home when they're away. Some campers most miss their parents; others most miss home cooking, a sibling, or the family pet. Whatever they miss, the vast majority of children have a great time at camp and are not bothered by mild homesickness.
- Homesickness is something everyone can learn to cope with. In fact, research has uncovered multiple strategies that work for kids. Most kids use more than one strategy to help them deal with homesickness.
- Homesickness builds confidence. Overcoming a bout of homesickness and enjoying time away from home nurtures children's independence and prepares them for the future. The fact that second-year campers are usually less homesick than first-year campers is evidence of this powerful growth.

- Homesickness has a silver lining. If there's something about home children miss, that means there's something about home they love — and that's a wonderful thing. Sometimes just knowing that what they feel is a reflection of love makes campers feel much better.

So if nearly everyone feels some homesickness, what can be done to prevent a really strong case of homesickness? Here's a recipe for positive camp preparation:

- Make camp decisions together.
- Arrange lots of practice time away from home.
- Share your optimism, not your anxiety.
- Never ever make a pick-up deal.

OK, then, what are the most effective ways of coping with homesickness at camp? What advice can you write in a letter or e-mail to your son or daughter if you get a homesick letter?

Anti-Homesickness Strategies for Kids

- Stay busy. Doing a fun, physical activity nearly always reduces homesickness intensity.
- Stay positive. Remembering all the cool stuff you can do at camp keeps the focus on fun, not on home.
- Stay in touch. Writing letters, looking at a photo from home, or holding a memento from home can be very comforting.
- Stay social. Making new friends is a perfect antidote to bothersome homesickness. Talking to the staff at camp is also reassuring.
- Stay focused. Remember that you're not at camp forever, just a few weeks. Bringing a calendar to camp helps you be clear about the length of your stay.
- Stay confident. Anti-homesickness strategies take some time to work. Kids who stick with their strategies for five or six days almost always feel better.

Mom and Dad, your help preparing your child for this amazing growth experience will pay huge dividends. After a session of camp, you'll see an increase in your child's confidence, social skills, and leadership. And while your son or daughter is at camp, you can enjoy a well-deserved break from full-time parenthood. Remember: Homesickness is part of normal development. Our job should be to coach children through the experience, not to avoid the topic altogether.

First Time at Camp?

Talking With Your Child

Bob Ditter, L.C.S.W.

Sending your child away to camp for the first time is a major milestone for most families, one that is often marked by excitement, anticipation, and perhaps even some anxiety. Though camp is certainly about making friends and having fun, it is also about being on your own and being a part of a community. One of the most important things you as a parent can do to help prepare your child for both these aspects of camp is to talk with your child about it before he or she goes.

In fact, it may be better to have several occasional, shorter talks rather than one long conversation as children often absorb more when there is less to think about at one time. I also find that children do better with this sort of conversation if it is part of a more general conversation and if it is part of a pattern of talking, either at the dinner table or while riding in the car doing errands.

Friends

Camp is not anything if it is not about making new friends. If you are shy about meeting new kids, then learn to get to know others by being a good listener. Remember also that not everyone in your cabin, bunk, or group has to be your friend, and you don't have to be everyone else's friend. As long as you treat others with respect and they do the same with you, then having one or two friends at camp is fine. If you have more, then that's great!

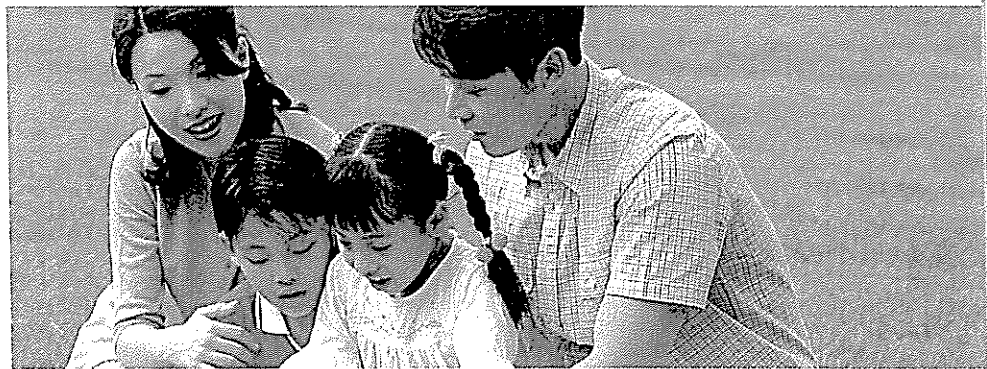
Activities

There are many exciting things to do at camp, many of which you may never have tried before. If your child tends to be a bit homesick or worried about being homesick, remind him or her about the excitement of going to camp: Remember, when you first decided to go to camp, what made you so excited? You may not like all the activities, or you may be better at some than others. That's

normal. I, however, hope you are willing to try. The more you put into camp, the more you will get out of it!

Helping out

Camp is about fun, but it also requires that you help out. Cleanup is part of camp. You do it every day! As your parent, I hope you will cooperate!



Getting help

Everyone has good days and bad days. If you are having a problem, your counselor is there to help you! You don't have to wait to tell us if you are upset about something. After all, if your counselor doesn't know what might be troubling you, he or she can't help you. Be honest and ask for what you need. If your counselor doesn't seem to be concerned or doesn't help you, then you can go to the unit director, head counselor, etc. Parents should know who these "back-

up persons" are and how their child will recognize them if they need to.

Being positive

It's a great thing to remind your first-time camper about his or her strong points. I would focus not just on what they do well, but their positive qualities as well, such as what makes them a good friend or the type of person other kids would want to know. Helping children identify their strengths can help them when they are having a setback — one of those inevitable growing pains all children have from time to time.

Talking with your child about these kinds of issues is a great way to show support as your child gets ready to take this important step on the road to being more resilient and self-reliant. For you

as a parent, it can give you more peace of mind as you allow your child to participate safely in a broader world.
