



An Open Letter to Parents

from Dr. Christopher Thurber © 2009 Newsweek

The Great News About Homesickness

Dear Moms and Dads,

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% 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. (More on that below.) 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 lots 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. Where to go, what type of camp to attend, and how long to stay are all decisions your child can make with you. Also, shop and pack for camp together. Involving children gives them a sense of ownership.
- Arrange lots of practice time away from home. Overnights at friends' houses, weekends with grandparents, and other time away from home teach children to cope effectively with separation. It also gives them a chance to practice the primary way they'll stay in touch with you at camp: letter writing.

- Speaking of letter writing...If you want to get any mail yourself, be sure to pack pre-stamped, pre-addressed envelopes in your child's trunk.
- Share your optimism, not your anxiety. Talk about all the positive aspects of camp and share your concerns only with another adult, such as your spouse or the camp director. Avoid giving your son or daughter a mixed message by saying something like, "Have a great time at camp. I hope I remember to feed your dog." Giving your child something to worry about while she's away will only increase homesickness.
- Never ever make a pick-up deal. Saying, "If you feel homesick, we'll come to get you" undermines children's confidence and ensures they'll be preoccupied with home from the moment they arrive at camp. Instead of making a pick-up deal, say, "I'm sure that if you miss home, you and your cabin leader will be able to work together to help you feel better. Camp will be a blast!"

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?

- 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.



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