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# How to Choose a Camp: Homesickness

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How to Prevent

## Helping with Homesickness

### What is it?

Homesickness is, above all, a normal feeling. It is the natural result of separating from home and loved ones. In a recent study, nearly 96 percent of all boys and girls who were spending two weeks or more at overnight camp reported some homesickness on at least one day. Almost all children (and grown-ups!) feel homesick when they're away from home. People's feelings simply vary in intensity.



### What causes it?

There are several factors that put children at greater risk for becoming homesick. For example, children with little previous experience away from home, children who have low expectations of camp, children who feel forced to go to camp, children who are unsure whether adults will help them if they need help, children who have little practice coping with negative emotions, and children whose parents express a lot of anxiety are most likely to feel homesick.

You may be surprised to learn that some factors have nothing to do with the intensity of homesickness. These include geographic distance between home and camp and the presence of a friend from home at camp.

### When is it a problem?

Most feelings of homesickness are not problematic. In fact, missing home isn't a problem until it becomes a preoccupation. When the feelings of sadness and anxiety associated with missing home become so strong that making friends, having fun, sleeping, eating, and participating in activities is difficult, something must be done.

### What can be done?

It used to be thought that feelings of missing home disappeared spontaneously after a few days at camp. Although this is true for some cases of mild homesickness, research has demonstrated that if left unchecked, homesickness can intensify over time. The best remedy

is a two-pronged approach:

(1) Prevent homesickness at home, before it starts; and (2) Actively cope at camp, if natural feelings of homesickness reach problematic levels.

### **The best at-home prevention strategies include:**

- working together as a family to select a camp, plan, and pack
- spending practice time away from home, such as a long weekend at a friend's house
- experimenting with the best coping strategies during this practice separation
- preparing pre-stamped, pre-addressed envelopes to bring to camp

### **The best in-camp interventions for homesick campers include:**

- staying busy
- talking with someone
- remembering that you're not at camp for your whole life-just a few weeks
- writing letters home
- remembering all the fun activities that camp offers.and doing them!

### **Watch out!**

The most common mistake parents make is the Pick-Up Deal. It's normal for children to ask, "What if I feel homesick?" Tell your child that some feelings of homesickness are normal and help him practice coping before camp starts. But never ever say, "If you feel homesick, I'll come and get you." This conveys a message of doubt and pity that undermines children's confidence and independence. Pick-Up Deals become mental crutches and self-fulfilling prophecies for children as soon as they arrive at camp. If, after spending practice time away from home, a child is still very anxious about overnight camp, consider waiting a until next summer.

### **The Good News**

When children arrive at camp with a repertoire of coping strategies and some practice time away from home under their belts, they are ready for those normal feelings of homesickness. Sure, they'll miss home, but they'll know exactly what to think and do when it bothers them. Best of all, the staff at a high quality camp will be there to help. Nothing boosts children's self-esteem quite like overcoming a bout of homesickness and learning how good they are at controlling the amount of fun they have. Camp truly is a classroom for life lessons.

### **To Learn More**

To learn more about finding a camp that matches your child's interests and abilities, more about preventing and managing homesickness, and more about getting the most out of a summer camp experience, we recommend **The Summer Camp Handbook**, by Christopher Thurber, Ph.D, and Jon Malinowski, Ph.D. Their book is available from the American Camp Association ([www.acabookstore.org](http://www.acabookstore.org) <sup>[1]</sup>), Amazon, or your local bookstore.

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How To Cope

## **Helping Your Child Cope at Camp**

**Following are some tips from the American Camp Association to consider before your child leaves for camp:**

- If possible, visit the camp ahead of time so that your child will be familiar with the cabins and other general surroundings
- Consider arranging for a first-time camper to attend with a close friend, relative, or camp "buddy"
- Do not tell your child in advance that you will "rescue" him/her from camp if he/she doesn't like it
- Discuss what camp will be like well before your child leaves, acknowledging feelings; consider role-playing anticipated camp situations such as using a flashlight to find the bathroom
- Send a letter to your child before camp begins so he/she will have a letter waiting for his/her arrival
- Allow your child to pack a favorite stuffed animal and/or picture so that your child will have a reminder of home



If adjustment problems (such as homesickness) do occur while your child is at camp:

- Talk candidly with the camp director to obtain his/her perception of your child's adjustment
- Resist the temptation to "rescue" your son or daughter from this experience
- Acknowledge your child's feelings and communicate your love. You might say, "If you still feel this way in two days, we'll discuss what we can do."
- Support your child's efforts to work out the problems with the help of the camp staff
- Remind him/her, if necessary, that he/she has made a commitment
- Trust your instincts: The occasional child who is truly not enjoying anything, having a miserable time and not adjusting to camp life at all should be allowed to return home after a reasonable amount of time and effort

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Prescription for Camper Homesickness

### **More camp advice for parents!**

This summer, millions of children will get their first taste of independence at a summer resident camp. For many, it will also be their first experience with homesickness. But parents don't have to feel helpless when homesickness strikes. The prescription for camper homesickness is a simple solution of preparation and patience.



University of California Psychologist Chris Thurber studied homesickness in 329 boys between the ages of 8 and 16 at resident camp. According to his results, homesickness is the norm rather than the exception. A whopping 83 percent of the campers studied reported homesickness on at least one day of camp.

Thurber and the American Camping Association (ACA) suggest the following tips for parents to help their child deal with homesickness at camp:

- Encourage your child's independence throughout the year. Practice separations, such as sleep-overs at a friend's house, can simulate the camp environment

- Involve your child in the process of choosing a camp. The more that the child owns the decision, the more comfortable the child will feel being at camp
- Discuss what camp will be like before your child leaves. Consider role-playing anticipated situations, such as using a flashlight to find the bathroom
- Reach an agreement ahead of time on calling each other. If your child's camp has a no phone calls policy, honor it
- Send a note or care package ahead of time to arrive the first day of camp. Acknowledge, in a positive way, that you will miss your child. For example, you can say "I am going to miss you, but I know that you will have a good time at camp."
- Don't use bribery. Linking a successful stay at camp to a material object sends the wrong message. The reward should be your child's new found confidence and independence
- Pack a personal item from home, such as a stuffed animal
- When a "rescue call" comes from the child, offer calm reassurance and put the time frame into perspective. Avoid the temptation to take the child home early
- Talk candidly with the camp director to obtain his/her perspective on your child's adjustment
- Don't feel guilty about encouraging your child to stay at camp. For many children, camp is a first step toward independence and plays an important role in their growth and development
- Trust your instincts. While most incidents of homesickness will pass in a day or two, Thurber's research shows that approximately seven percent of the cases are severe. If your child is not eating or sleeping because of anxiety or depression, it is time to go home. However, don't make your child feel like a failure if their stay at camp is cut short. Focus on the positive and encourage your child to try camp again next year

## Keeping in Touch

Many directors encourage their campers to write home regularly to their parents, brothers, and sisters.

### Do's

- Give your child pre-addressed, stamped envelopes or postcards so that they can keep you informed of camp activities
- Ask the camp director if electronic communications are available for campers' use. If so, remind your child that you can stay connected with him or her through home e-mail, fax, or the camp's Web site
- Send a note or postcard in advance to the camp so there will be a personalized touch of home when your child arrives. This lets young campers know that the family has not forgotten them. In your correspondence, assure the camper that you know he or she is having a good time and express enthusiasm for the camp's activities

### Don'ts

- Although there are benefits in keeping youngsters informed of what's going on at home, don't go into great detail since the young adventurers might feel they're missing something back home. Directors advise parents not to mention how much they miss their children or "that the dog and cat miss them."
- Don't worry. Your natural reaction is to call on the first day just about bedtime to see how your camper is doing. Remember, counselors are trained to recognize and deal

with symptoms of homesickness

- As one experienced camp director noted, "We have few homesick children, but we have homesick parents by the dozens."

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